XV
Tearmoon Empire
Nozomu Mochitsuki
Illustrator: Gilse

Characters

Tearmoon Empire

Patricia

A young girl who appeared with Bel.

GRANDDAUGHTER AND GRANDMOTHER

Miabel

After an arrow pierced her throat, she disappeared into the light. Now, she has reappeared, looking a bit older.

Mia

Protagonist. The sole princess of the empire. Ex-selfish brat. Actually a coward. A revolution leads to her execution, but she somehow leaps back through time and wakes up a twelve-year-old again. She successfully avoids a repeat encounter with the guillotine, but then Bel shows up...

The Four Dukes' Families

Ruby

The daughter of the Duke of Redmoon. A gallant lady with a wardrobe to match.

Citrina

The only daughter of the House of Yellowmoon. Bel's first friend.

Esmeralda

The eldest daughter of the House of Greenmoon. Self-proclaimed best friend of Mia.

Sapphias

The eldest son of the House of Bluemoon. Got into the student council thanks to Mia.

Ludwig

Young, motivated government official. Sharp tongue. Ardently believes in Mia and is trying to make her Empress.

Anne

Mia's maid-in-waiting. Born into a poor family of merchants. Helped Mia in the previous timeline. In the present, she is an ardent Mia devotee.

ARCHENEMESIS

Dion

The strongest knight in the Empire. In the previous timeline, he was Mia's executioner.

※ ——— Future Timeline Relationship

※ ..... Previous Timeline Relationship

Outcount Rudolvon's Family

Cyril

Tiona's younger brother. Super smart. Developed cold-resistant wheat.

Tiona

The eldest daughter of Outcount Rudolvon. Looks up to Mia. In the previous timeline, she led the revolutionary army.

Revolution

Archnemesis

Assistance

Archnemesis

Kingdom of Sunkland

Keithwood

Prince Sion's attendant. A cynic—but a competent one.

Sion

Crown Prince. All-around genius. In the previous timeline he was Mia's archnemesis, aided Tiona and eventually became known as the "Penal King." In the present, he accepts that Mia is the Great Sage of the Empire.

[Wind Crows] Sunkland's intelligence service.

[White Crows] A team within the Wind Crows formed with a specific goal in mind.

Support

Support

Holy Principality of Belluga

Rafina

The duke's daughter. Saint-Noel Academy's de facto decision maker. In the previous timeline, she supported Sion and Tiona from behind the scenes. Her smile can be lethal.

[Saint-Noel Academy]

A super elite school attended by all the highborn children of neighboring nations.

Kingdom of Remno

Abel

Second Prince. In the previous timeline, he was known to be an extraordinary playboy. Now, as a result of meeting Mia, he works diligently to improve his swordsmanship instead.

[Forkroad & Co.]

Chloe

The only heir of Marco Forkroad, whose company spans multiple kingdoms. She is Mia's classmate and book buddy.

Chaos Serpents

A group of chaosmongers trying to wreak havoc upon the world. They are deeply hostile toward the Holy Principality of Belluga and the Central Orthodox Church. Traces of their clandestine misdeeds can be found throughout history, but the details are shrouded in mystery.

Tearmoon Empire

Nina
Esmeralda's maid-in-waiting.

Musta
Head chef of the imperial court of the Tearmoon Empire.

Liora
Tiona's maid. Hails from the Lulu tribe who live in the forest. An expert archer.

Elise
Anne's younger sister and the second daughter of the Littstein family. Mia's court author.

Adelaide
Mia's mother. Deceased.

Vanos
Dion's adjutant and former vice-captain of a hundred-man squad in Tearmoon's imperial army. A giant of a man.

Matthias
Mia's father. Tearmoon's emperor. Dotes on his daughter.

Gilbert
A fellow disciple of Ludwig's cohort.

Hildebrandt
Ruby's former fiancé-to-be, Mia's cousin, and an unparalleled horse maniac.

Balthazar
A fellow disciple of Ludwig's cohort.

Galv
An old wiseman and master to Ludwig.

Letizia
Marquess Schubert's daughter and Sapphias's fiancée.

Dario
Sapphias's little brother by way of Letizia.

Equestrian Kingdom

Ka Aima
Maku's younger sister and skilled horsewoman.

Ka Maku
Skilled wolfmaster working for the Chaos Serpents and Chief of the Fire Clan.

Kuolan
A Moonhare. Mia's favorite horse.

Lin Malong
Mia's senior. Club leader of Saint-Noel Academy's Horsemanship Club.

Ka Kunlou
Serpent shaman and man who handed Echard poison.

Hasuki
Aima's wolf companion.

Kingdom of Sunkland

Monica
A member of the White Crows.

Graham
A member of the White Crows.

Kingdom of Remno

Valentina
Abel's elder sister and High Priestess of the Chaos Serpents. She's currently imprisoned.

Lynsha
The daughter of a fallen noble family in Remno who now serves as Rafina's maid.

Gain
Abel's older brother. Subscribes to male chauvinism.

Merchants

Marco
Chloe's father. Head of Forkroad & Co.

Shalloak
A powerful merchant who sells all sorts of goods to kingdoms throughout the continent.

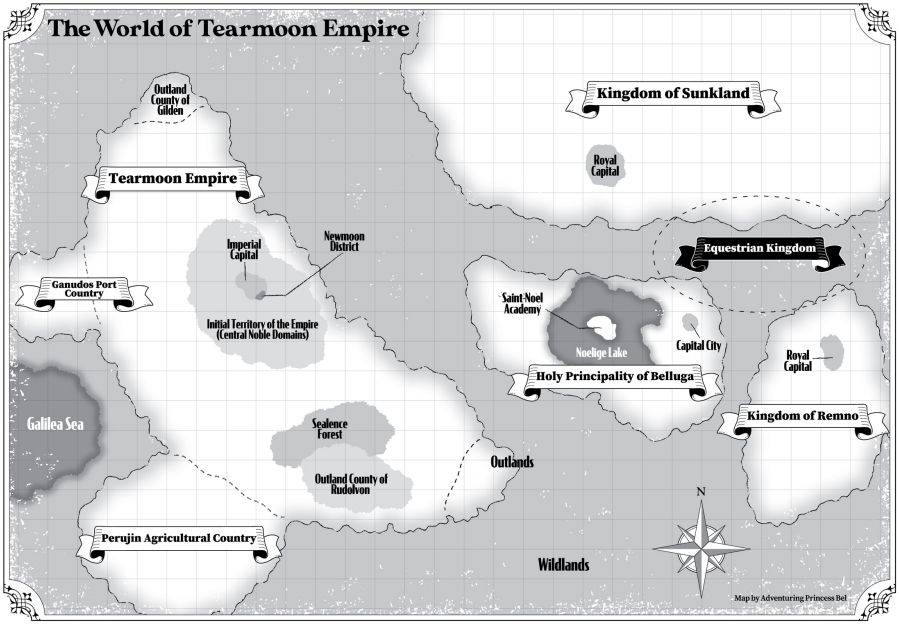
Perujin Agricultural Country

Rania
The third princess of Perujin. Mia's schoolmate.

Arshia
The second princess of Perujin. Rania's older sister.

Story

Mia, selfish princess of the Tearmoon Empire, sets off with Ludwig's diary to solve the mystery of how her granddaughter Bel and her grandmother Patty have time traveled, one from the past and one from the future. Mia is doing all she can to free Patty from the Serpents' teachings, but...


The World of Tearmoon Empire
Outland County of Gilden
Kingdom of Sunkland
Royal Capital
Tearmoon Empire
Imperial Capital
Newmoon District
Equestrian Kingdom
Ganudos Port Country
Saint-Noel Academy
Noelige Lake
Capital City
Royal Capital
Initial Territory of the Empire (Central Noble Domains)
Holy Principality of Belluga
Galilea Sea
Kingdom of Remno
Sealence Forest
Outlands
Outland County of Rudolvon
N
Perujin Agricultural Country
Wildlands
Map by Adventuring Princess Bel

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Part 7: The Golden Lighthouse of the Aurelia Shines Bright! I

Prologue

I am sure that my dear readers know that there are many recorded episodes from the life of Empress Mia Luna Tearmoon, the Great Sage of the Empire. However, not so many know that her grandmother Empress Patricia has some odd stories of her own.

This episode occurred during a visit to Perujin Agricultural Country. A banquet had been prepared for Empress Patricia, yet she appeared utterly unmoved. However, that was not so unusual for her, as she was the type who rarely revealed her emotions.

Yet there was a single dish that earned a reaction from her: a traditional Perujin cake known as castilla. Had a reaction been the whole story, this would have been nothing of import. It would have simply meant that the cake's sweetness was to her tastes. What was odd, however, was how she reacted, as one of her retainers testified that she whispered, "Ah, that's what my elder sister was..." with a kind, wistful grin.

According to public records, Empress Patricia had no sister. Her only surviving family was her younger brother Marquess Clausius, and there were none who would have deserved such a title from her. Even so, the words "elder sister" had spilled from her mouth.

It is unclear who those words were referring to. Was there a hidden secret of the crown within her mumblings, or perhaps a scandal? Whatever it is, that answer has been lost to history.

Excerpt from *The Twelve Mysteries of the Great Sage Empress Mia Luna Tearmoon* from the *"Important Tearmoon Figures"* Series

"It's almost time for dinner, Patty! Patty?" called out Mia. The girl in question was lying still on the bed with her arms covering

her face.

She didn't react to a meal cooked by the chef at all! This is truly troublesome...

Mia shared a glance with Yanna and Kiryl, who were beside her. They seemed to pick up on Mia's thoughts, as on the signal of a nod, they approached Patty. Mia decided to leave things to them and stepped out of the room, which was one of the guest quarters located in the Whitemoon Palace in the center of Lunatear.

Mia gazed at the heavy doors with a sigh. After returning from the cooking party at the Schuberts' residence, Patty had been bedridden. She simply lay there, and even dinner wasn't enough to rouse her. Mia herself spent quite a lot of time lounging in bed, but she couldn't help but worry watching a hard worker like Patty fall into similar habits.

"I really do hope she's okay... I let my mouth run without thinking, but perhaps this is for the best."

After watching Patty break into tears at the Schuberts' residence, Mia couldn't help but panic and let the words, "I see. If you really must, let's head for the Clausius domain," slip out of her mouth.

"Huh?" Patty had asked, blinking her eyes.

Mia had kindly smiled back at her. "If you wish to go home, I have no right to stop you. I'm not trying to bully you, after all."

At least, that's what Mia had said in the moment.

"But if I bring her to the Clausius domain, that will mean revealing that this is the future. That won't solve all our problems. Not to mention..."

Mia thought back on Patty's current state and sighed. Ever since they returned to the Whitemoon Palace, she had been completely devoid of energy—no, more than energy, she was devoid of life itself. Seeing her grandmother so despondent and unresponsive caused unmeasurable worry for Mia.

"We'll be in real trouble if she stops eating her meals. As long as she keeps eating, her energy will return. Hm, food..." mumbled Mia as she folded her arms. "If we're trying to cheer someone up, we'll need sweets! We're off to speak with the chef, Anne! I want your help too."

Anne had been waiting on her master from behind, but seeing her resolve, she stuck her hand to her chest and vigorously declared, "Yes, milady!"

Chapter 1: Ludwig's Battle Analysis, and...

"I see. So Her Highness took it upon herself to..." Ludwig couldn't help but sigh upon hearing the details of what had happened at the Schuberts' residence. "...use the poisonous mushrooms growing at the manor to neutralize the criminal. Interrogations went smoothly as well. She really is something..."

She was resourceful and adaptable, and Ludwig couldn't help but feel dizzy at how the otherworldly flexible thinking of the Great Sage had saved the day. The light of the sun hit his glasses, causing them to glint.

"Still, to think the Serpents had slithered their way into Marquess Schubert's manor..." Hearing that Sapphias would stage a coup, Ludwig had been in a state of half disbelief, but he nevertheless had continued his investigations into the actions taken by the Bluemoon faction and who could be the instigator to raise a rebellion. "It's a shame he isn't currently in Tearmoon..."

"He"—that is, Gilbert Bouquet (aka Gil), his fellow disciple of the Wandering Wiseman Galv. Gil was better informed on matters of Lunatear's politics and the central nobility than Ludwig, but he was presently in the former domain of House Clausius to investigate the family. Had he been here, Ludwig would likely have had an easier time investigating the movements of the Bluemoon faction.

"Having the right connections truly is essential. These things take time with my go-betweens." He had yet to fully grasp what all the nobles in the faction were up to, but according to the information he had managed to obtain, there were currently none who would have cooperated in staging a coup.

"Of course there aren't..." muttered Ludwig. Mia was currently the key player in disseminating provisions throughout the empire. Perujin Agricultural Country, their greatest supplier of foodstuffs, had announced its full support for Mia, and the same could be said for Outcount Gilden and Outcount Rudolvon, who supplied their

wheat. Even Forkroad & Co., the company handling foreign imports, was a friend of Mia's. Poor harvests were occurring all across Tearmoon, and any noble somewhat knowledgeable about the state of his domain would know that getting on Mia's bad side wasn't a good idea.

Of course, some of the dull-witted nobles wouldn't take their domain's food storages into consideration and instead support Sapphias in his rebellion under the assumption that him being emperor would be better for them, but one of Mia's connections kept such types at bay—the Holy Lady Rafina. To those who coveted power, the value of the Holy Lady's name was immeasurable.

"Even if they were able to turn against His Imperial Majesty and Princess Mia, they couldn't disobey the authority of Belluga. From that perspective, there could be no one who would raise the flag of rebellion against Her Highness, but..." Ludwig stressed his final words. "The future is not fixed."

Humans naturally forgot the warmth of a hot tea once it had passed from their mouths to their stomachs. Once the danger of famine had ended, Mia's influence would likely dwindle.

"And as long as the heir to the throne remains uncertain...the dormant threat of the Bluemoons will not be neutralized, which means as long as Her Highness isn't empress, Lord Sapphias will remain an easy target of the Serpents' wiles." Ludwig let his mind wander. "'Empress Mia,' huh?"

Ludwig pondered the feasibility of this dream. What forces would offer their unconditional support for Mia to take the throne? The current emperor would surely back her—rather, it was safe to assume that anything Mia might suggest, the emperor was an immediate yes. Ludwig didn't have to worry about Outcounts Rudolvon or Gilden either, and the support of the Yellowmoons and Redmoons would surely prove a boon as well. Having the support of two of the Four Dukes put them in a good spot, but...

"Even if Duke Redmoon supports us, what of the military? His influence over them is surely great, but the Ebony Moon Ministry and the Redmoons are not one and the same." There was a need to one day reform Tearmoon's military, but what would they think if it happened at the hands of an empress? "Since I am sure there are some stubborn officers among them, I doubt we can rely on the Ebony Moon Ministry. On the other hand, it's the Scarlet Moon

Ministry that is supportive of Her Highness's efforts for agricultural reform. The Jade Moon Ministry which handles diplomacy is likely more on Her Highness's side than not, but it's unclear where the loyalties of the Greenmoons lie..."

Ludwig was quite sure that Mia would be able to rise to empress now, but at the same time, he knew that announcing such intentions at this point in time would make things harder.

"It would be a loss for the whole continent to have Her Highness entrenched only in the internal problems of Tearmoon." Ludwig wanted to promptly get a handle on Tearmoon's internal affairs, but to do that, he needed allies—influential nobles who understood Mia's aims and could cooperate in realizing them. "Whether we can borrow the power of the nobles the Yellowmoons escaped abroad may be what makes or breaks us."

Suddenly, there was a knock on his office door. "Are you there, Ludwig?"

"Ah, Princess Mia." Learning that the woman he served was at the door, he rushed to open it. Then, he was faced with a girl looking incredibly despondent.

"What is it, Your Highness?" Ludwig titled his head, unable to determine the cause of her worries.

"I'd like to visit the former domain of House Clausius. Can I ask you to make the necessary preparations?"

The look on her face was so serious that for a moment, he was silent. But then, he nodded.

Chapter 2: Father and Daughter

"Incidentally, Your Highness, have you informed your father of these plans?"

Mia tilted her head. "Hm? My father? Not yet, but...it should be fine. I doubt he'd object," she casually responded.

It was rare for Ludwig to be stern, but right now, he was. "No, I believe there is a need to inform His Majesty. If others see this as your own maneuvering, you will be giving the other nobles an excuse to criticize you."

"Hm... Well, if you say so." Mia nodded obediently. For one, Ludwig was the person who would be making the preparations for their journey, and regardless of his words, listening to what he said could never be a mistake. Mia Yes-man Luna Tearmoon knew well that there were many things that surpassed her thinking, and thus, was prepared to toss her thinking to the curb and simply go along with others when the time was right. Leaving the situation to her trusty vassal was the right move, and all her senses were backing that decision.

Thus, that night, she visited her father's quarters.

"Ah, Mia! My dear daughter! What can papa do for you? Could this be a much welcome invite to accompany you, Bel, and Patty for some fun?" The horsemanship tournament the other day still had him in high spirits, and he grinned gleefully.

Mia sensed that this was the perfect time to ask for some favors, so she decided to forgo greetings and jump straight into the topic at hand. "Actually, father, I was thinking of visiting the Clausius family's residence."

"Huh? Do you mean the house my mother was raised in?" Matthias's eyes widened. He hadn't been expecting this.

Mia nodded. "Yes. I've been a bit interested in Grandmother Patricia lately, so I thought..."

"But the house of Marquess Clausius is no longer..." he muttered, confused.

"Yes, I know that they lacked an heir and are no longer,

but...the home itself hasn't been destroyed, has it?"

"It hasn't. I hear the manor is being looked after. But I see, so you're going to the old manor of House Clausius..." Emperor Matthias Luna Tearmoon stared off into the distance, his eyes overcome with emotions. "Incidentally, will *he...Prince Abel*...be coming?"

That sudden question caught Mia off guard. "Huh? O-Oh, yes, well, I was planning on having him accompany me..."

Abel had already come all the way to Tearmoon, so she couldn't just leave him behind. Aima would most likely be attending as well. *Though Aima may want to pursue Ka Kunlou, so I'll have to check in with her.*

As such thoughts were running through Mia's head, her father had stood up in a grand display. "Well then! In that case, I shall be coming as well!"

His declaration was absurd, and for a moment, Mia could only stare blankly back at him, unable to understand what he had just said. "Um, father? What was that just now?"

"Hm? You didn't hear me? I said I will be accompanying you." Emperor Matthias plopped himself back in his seat and twisted his body. "I've actually been accompanying Duke Redmoon and the captain of your Princess Guard for some exercise lately."

"Th-This is the first I'm hearing of this!" Mia imagined her father being coached by Vanos into someone burly and muscular. *Huh! That actually sounds pretty good!* Mia had an affinity for large men, you see.

"It made me realize that being cooped up in the castle wasn't good for my health! I need to travel from time to time," he said with a burly laugh.

Mia rushed to convince him otherwise. "No, father—I mean, no, Your Majesty. The emperor can't just leave the castle whenever he pleases. Without you, who will take care of governing Tearmoon... Wait, governing?"

A thought flashed through Mia's mind, leaving her suddenly at a loss for words: *Huh? I actually don't think my father's absence would be too big a deal.*

Whether he realized this or not, her father maintained his smile and laughed. "What are you saying?! My presence or absence will have no effects on politics and governance!" Was it really okay for him to put that so bluntly?

Well, he isn't wrong, but... Mia couldn't help but groan.

"Rather, you've been more the center of politics than I have these days, right?" Once again, his words were incredibly blunt.

But it can't be good if that's true! she lamented, but Mia herself had already come to the same realization. *Though I can't really deny that either...*

In any case, Mia had built a large network of connections in her attempt to avoid a revolution. The fact that Tearmoon was still standing was undoubtedly due to Mia's efforts. *If Ludwig's feats can ultimately be traced back to me, then I really may be the center of things here. Ugh! This is so annoying! I need to stress how much of this is Ludwig's doing to avoid that being the case in the future...*

It was unusual for Mia to be so emotional, but for a moment, she couldn't help but marvel at how far she had come to escape the guillotine. "To escape the guillotine, huh? Ah, that reminds me..."

A scene suddenly flashed through her mind—a memory engulfed by the flames of war and revolution.

"Ugh, these meals get less impressive with each passing day."

This was a memory from the previous timeline. That day, Mia had been sharing dinner with her father, Emperor Matthias Luna Tearmoon, inside the Whitemoon Palace. Once, lavish china had filled their table, but now, that was all a distant memory. Before them were small plates with a pittance of food. While their meal surpassed that of their struggling citizens, the dishes were too lacking to be called a meal fit for an emperor, and it had Mia letting out a dispirited sigh.

"How disgraceful to have my daughter looking so sad! I suppose I need to fire this chef," said Matthias, his brow furrowed.

"Yes, you're right." Mia crossed her arms and took a moment to think. "No, actually. It's not so bad." At the last moment, she stopped herself. The reason was simple: she imagined the face of a certain young, bespectacled civil servant glaring at her. "We're in the middle of a famine. There's not much anyone can do."

At the time, Mia had a slight—emphasis on *slight*—understanding of Tearmoon's current abysmal circumstances.

"Well, if you say so... Ah! That's right! How does this sound?" Matthias clapped his hands and looked at Mia. "Once things settle down, why don't we take a vacation together? If you want to eat something where it tastes the best, your only option is to go to

where it's from yourself!" His words were so gleeful he was practically humming. "That's right! If we can't get ingredients in the capital, we simply need to go to where they're cultivated. We could visit Perujin Agricultural Country or Ganudos Port Country or..."

Mia dismissed her joyful father. "What are you talking about? You're the emperor. You can't just leave the capital." For a moment, Mia imagined a vacation with her father, and it caused her to shudder. Taking a trip with him sounded like such a pain she made sure to refuse him sternly. "The great emperor himself traveling for food is preposterous."

Hearing that, there was something despondent in Matthias's eyes. "Moons, how terrible. Even I, the emperor, cannot get my wishes granted, nor can I travel with my beloved daughter. I'm so useless it almost seems better to run and leave it all behind..."

Mia once again recalled this conversation after she had been thrown in the dungeons and heard the news that her father was to be executed. As her heart sank into despair, what she remembered was the sad look on his face, and what filled her chest was regret.

If things were going to come to this, I shouldn't have been so mean to him. I should have been nicer... I should have taken that trip with him. If I had known that would be our last, I would have never said such a thing.

That regret carved itself into the deepest corners of her heart.

"What's wrong, Mia? You're staring into space."

"Huh?" Mia looked up to find her father peering into her face with worry. "O-Oh. It's nothing, father." Mia hurried to collect herself, though her father's curious look remained.

"I see. Well, in any case, if you do not agree to bring me, then I'll have to stop this—"

"There's no need, father. Come with us."

He blinked his eyes. "Huh? Oh, but..." Mia had given her approval much easier than he had expected, and for a moment, he could only hang his mouth open in shock. "Is it really okay? If you'd like to go with Prince Abel, then..."

"Moons! I haven't said anything like that! I just want to visit the old manor of the Clausiuses!" she said, her arms crossed. "I'm sure you know about them, right? I just realized that I could have you tell me about them on the way there. I'd enjoy your company."

Right. Yes. I'm sure father has some information, and he might have some knowledge about Patty's younger brother, my Great-Uncle Hannes. It should be all right to take him with me.

Mia's grin turned bitter. "Well, while it may be some extra work for Ludwig, I suppose this will be a father-daughter journey..."

Thus, the Mia group's (and Matthias's) secret trip was a go!

"I suppose that means I've finished all my preparations to visit the old manor of Marquess Clausius, so next..."

Once Mia had returned to her room, she jumped right into bed. She continued to lay there, but not to slack off, mind you. Instead, she was there to think. Yes, *think*. Mia was a woman with much to consider.

In truth, her decision to visit the old manor of the Clausiuses had not been well thought out. She had simply let the moment sweep her away. Seeing Patty like that, it would have been impossible for her to refrain from making the suggestion.

"Now that it's been decided upon, there's no point regretting it. I need to consider what happens once we get there. I wasn't expecting father to come with us, but I'm sure Ludwig will be able to cover for me... Really, he was the one who suggested telling my father, so he'll have to." Mia tossed the responsibility onto Ludwig. "My biggest problem is how Patty will react once she sees the Clausius domain now, though I don't think she would believe me if I suddenly told her she had come to the future... This will be hard to explain."

Mia crossed her arms. Her brain was working so hard that smoke billowed from her ears. "Considering it took me some time to understand that I had been flung into the past myself, it will be hard to convince her that we're telling the truth. Though given her encounter with Gerta, I don't think she'd completely reject the idea..."

Mia hoped that Gerta would serve the same purpose to Patty as her diary had served her. Wouldn't encountering an acquaintance aged decades older than them convince someone they had jumped into the future? That meant...

"The real issue is whether Patty—my grandmother—will take our side." That was the crux of the matter. "Patty will return to the past one day, and if she knows this is the future, she'll return with

knowledge of what's to come, which will affect how she acts in the past. If she were to take the side of the Serpents..."

A shiver made its way down Mia's back. She could feel the vague presence of an approaching guillotine—she could even hear the sound of its blade falling!

"Th-That's just the worst-case scenario! We need to avoid that at all costs... But at the same time, if we keep her ignorant that this is the future and it fills her with despair, the Serpents will take advantage of her, which wouldn't be good either."

Gerta had said that the purpose of Empress Patricia's existence was to keep the present emperor in line with the first emperor's plans. Mia wanted Patty to feel strong enough to undermine that role, and if she wanted that to happen, she felt that she needed to be honest and properly foster the bond between them.

"If Galv and Ludwig are right and Patty came here for a reason, I can't be half-hearted with her. I need to face things head-on." With that, Mia suddenly had another thought. "I suppose it may be time to reveal my true identity."

Patty was under the impression that Mia was a teacher working with the Serpents. It kept Patty listening to Mia, but if Mia wished to free her from the Serpents' grasp, that lie couldn't continue forever.

"Yes, now's the time to reveal my lie and tell her the truth," said Mia with a bitter grin. "Thinking back on it, that method was never like me..." Regret began to swirl in her chest. "Isn't that how I accomplished everything thus far? It wasn't my position as princess, or appearances, and it definitely wasn't through misunderstandings! I earned everyone's trust with my honest heart!" she proclaimed, clenching her fists.

Mia was clearly misremembering some (or perhaps many) things, but...well, she was always like that. So much could be ignored.

"All right! If that's the case, my next course of action is revealing who I really am! I'll tell Patty that I'm fighting the Serpents and get her on my side, and for that, we'll need to visit the old Clausius manor!" Now that she had determined her next course of action, she groaned. "I'll have to ask Ludwig for even more support. I'll also want...well, not Bel's, but Rina's opinion. Anne has a good relationship with Patty as well. As for Yanna and Kiryl...that will depend on them."

With things now somewhat decided, Mia could finally take a breather. “Using my brain like this has me starving... Why don’t I ask Anne to prepare me a sweet snack before bed?”

Yes, Mia was relaxed in all senses of the word.

And thus, the story headed for the Clausius domain.

Chapter 3: Best! Friends! Forever!

Nobles of Tearmoon typically had a main residence in their domain and a separate villa in the capital of Lunatear. That was especially true for the eminent nobles and those of the central nobility, and naturally, the Greenmoons, one of the families who made up the Four Dukes, had a manor in Lunatear as well.

After parting ways with Mia and the others headed for the Clausius domain, Sion and Tiona set off for the Greenmoons' residence. Sion was there to see Echard and give the family who cared for him his regards, and Tiona wasn't just there to tag along; she had been invited by Esmerelda herself. Even though her younger brother Cyril and Echard were now somewhat friends, it was incredibly odd for her to visit the Greenmoons, one of the most important families in all of Tearmoon. Thus, Tiona couldn't completely conceal her nerves.

I'm glad Prince Sion is with me. I usually have Miss Mia, but going to see Miss Esmerelda by myself is too much for me...

Tiona still had a complex when it came to Tearmoon's central nobility. Thanks to Mia, the situation had been improving, but that didn't completely nullify Tiona's sense of inferiority. Tiona had once traveled with Esmerelda before, and she was one thing, but it was still impossible for Tiona to not feel anxious at the prospect of perhaps coming face-to-face with Duke Greenmoon himself. Thus, her expression was stiff as she entered the doors to their manor.

"Greetings, Prince Sion," called out the noble lady who had been waiting for them. Esmerelda Etoile Greenmoon lifted up the corners of her skirt in a perfect curtsy befitting her position as an Etoiler. "I am glad my brother-in-law is well," she said, looking slightly abashed. She was quick in matters of love, just like a certain princess (one perhaps named Mia).

"It feels quite odd to hear those words from a noble lady... I thought you had yet to properly marry Echard," said Sion, looking a bit uncomfortable.

"I was simply practicing for the future, dear brother-in-law!"

she casually said before turning her sights to Tiona, who couldn't help but jump. "It's been a while, Tiona. I believe this is our first time speaking without Mia present."

"Yes...I deeply thank you for the invitation, Lady Esmerelda," said Tiona. She spoke formally, and her back was straight as a pin.

Esmerelda shook her head in exasperation. "You don't have to be so nervous! Aren't we old friends who once walked the same school halls? Plus..." her expression turned serious. "The nation Miss Mia seeks to create makes no distinction between the central and outer nobility. Isn't that right?" She brought a hand to her chest. "I once believed it was just natural to look down on outcounts, and that it was my duty to do so to preserve tradition as an eminent noble. But Miss Mia enlightened me on a different path! She extended her hand and invited me to lend her my aid in creating a new Tearmoon unlike that of the past!"

Esmerelda dramatically clenched her fist over her chest as if to grab hold of that precious moment. "And I answered that call! As her friend—no, her *best* friend! I plan to dedicate my all to building her ideal future, and as long as you feel the same, then we are comrades. So? Do you feel the same?"

Tiona nodded in response to this straightforward question. "Yes...of course. I wish to give my all to Miss Mia."

"Well, I'm glad. That means we'll be able to get along!" responded Esmerelda with a calm grin before leading the two deeper into the manor. "My apologies, Prince Sion, but my father is absent today. I know well how insulting it is for him to be absent from the Prince of Sunkland's visit..." She stuck out her tongue. "Quite honestly, I thought you'd have a harder time getting the chance to talk to Prince Echard if my father were present."

"I'm not offended at all. In fact, I'm glad you would show me such consideration, Lady Esmerelda. Thank you for looking after my brother."

"There's no need for thanks. Rather, I find it a shame that this is all I can do..." she whispered with a grin. Then, she began to mutter to no one in particular. "But yes, I can't just sit back and have fun with Echard while all the other families of the Four Dukes are making their moves. But if Ruby has taken charge of the military and Sapphias is keeping his stubborn father in check, then there really isn't much left for me to do..." She brought a hand to her check. "For now, I can support Saint Mia Academy, and..." Her eyes

took on an ominous glint. “Give a warning to Ganudos Port Country, I suppose,” she said with a winning grin.

Esmerelda was the eldest daughter of the Greenmoons, a family at the center of Tearmoon’s diplomacy. However, what marks her maneuvering would make on history was still a mystery.

Chapter 4: The Emperor Lives the Dream

The sky was clear and the day was warm as a single carriage made its way down the country streets. At a glance, it looked like a single stagecoach. Certainly, none who laid eyes on it would expect it to contain the emperor and his daughter.

Inside were Mia, Matthias, Anne, Bel, Citrina, Patty, and even Yanna and Kiryl. The carriage carried eight passengers in total, and while it was big enough to require two horses leading it, it was quite cramped. Being accustomed to riding lavish coaches alone, Emperor Matthias must have felt that burden the most. At least, you would think.

"Aha ha! How long has it been since Mia and I last went on a trip together? How fun!" he said with a joyous laugh. He wasn't displeased in the slightest.

Well, given how he usually is, I wasn't really worried...

Mia couldn't help but sigh seeing the current state of her father. To his right was Patty, to his left was Bel, and sitting across from him was Mia. Being surrounded on both sides by his mother and great-granddaughter and with Mia in front of him, the man grinned gleefully. Mia, on the other hand, thought this positioning was so silly she was giggling.

"Oh! Look over there, gr—Your Majesty! That flower is so pretty!" said Bel, pointing her finger outside the carriage and jumping up and down on her seat.

"Bel! You mustn't do that," responded Matthias, his mood suddenly soured. "You are to call me 'papa' or 'father'!"

"Oh. Sorry, papa!" Bel just went along with it. That was her usual disposition, and it was clearly still going strong.

Incidentally, this trip was secret, and the group traveled undercover. They decided that Emperor Matthias would play the part of a merchant father while the rest pretended to be his children. Surrounded by so many kids, Emperor Matthias seemed to

be living the dream. “You may call me that as well, Citrina,” said Matthias.

She responded to his gaze with a lovely grin. “Yes, *father*. Rina shall refer to you as that for the duration of this trip.” And she avoided him with a lovely sidestep.

Matthias chuckled. “I suppose Lorentz would give me quite the glare if he heard you calling me papa.” He didn’t seem to mind at all. Now, he directed his gaze to the children. “Patty—and the rest of you—be sure to call me that as well. Why don’t we practice? Come now, you join in too, Mia,” he said, naturally throwing the ball of conversation over to Mia.

Well, I’m glad he’s having fun. The real problem is…

Mia naturally ignored him and turned her thoughts to Patty, who hung her head and was as expressionless as always. Even after they decided to visit the Clausius domain, Patty’s state hadn’t changed for the better. She appeared slightly restless, but Mia would likely have not noticed had she not been paying attention.

It really is quite difficult to tell what she’s thinking, which makes it difficult to judge the best timing for me to reveal who I am and tell her this is the future… Well, it would be quite bad if she didn’t easily believe me, so I guess that needs to come once we arrive. Still, that didn’t mean Mia hadn’t made any preparations; she had a plan! *I’ll reveal that I’m an adversary to the Serpents and get her on my side, and to do that, I need to get her stomach on my side by filling it with sweets! It’s the perfect plan!*

Mia’s stratagem was as sturdy as the great trees that grow on mountains…or really, the mushrooms growing at their roots. Treating others how you wished to be treated was the golden rule. She was bound to be happy, and no one could resist the temptation of sweets! Mia maneuvered with that conviction in mind and sent a glance to Anne, who nodded in response with an understanding huff and pulled out a basket.

“Are you hungry, Patty?”

“Huh?” Patty stared back at Mia with a blank expression, while next to her, Matthias stared back with great interest.

Mia smiled at them. “I take it you’ll be eating as well, father. I made some castilla for today.” Mia opened the basket Anne had passed her to reveal the fluffy, yellow cake that was castilla, a traditional sweet from Perujin Agricultural Country.

If Patty likes the castilla, she’ll like our relationship with Perujin as

well. That means that even if the worst-case scenario comes true and she doesn't escape the Serpents, she'll still put emphasis on maintaining Tearmoon's relationship with them!

As Mia was running those calculations, the joyous voice of Matthias rang through the room. "Dear moons! You made this yourself, Mia?!"

"Yes, of course," she said with a nod. At that, Matthias clenched his fists and let out a cheer of joy.

Incidentally, it should be noted that the castilla was made in the kitchens of the Whitemoon Palace, meaning that it was cooked under the watchful eyes of the chef. It was perfectly safe and delicious! She had no chance to mix in any mushrooms, resulting in a quality that Mia could have never managed on her own. Well, given that it was slightly mushroom-shaped, Mushroom Empress Mia perhaps did have some say in the matter...

"Here, Patty. It's quite sweet. Oh. Yanna, Kiryl, you two should eat up as well." While Mia was busy offering the cake to the kids, Matthias had grabbed a handful and shoved it in his mouth.

"Woo-hoo! This is the best castilla I've ever tasted! It's wonderful!" he said with an innocent grin and cheeks stuffed with cake. "Oh, how happy I am! Traveling alongside my beloved Mia, eating her handmade sweets surrounded by children..."

He had tears in his eyes, which was enough to leave Mia satisfied. She turned her attention to Patty and was puzzled by what she saw. She hadn't reached her hand toward the cake, and Yanna watched her with worry.

"Here, Patty. It's tasty," said Yanna, the concern clear in her voice.

Patty simply shook her head. "I don't need it. I'm not hungry."

"But..." Yanna was lost for words, her anxiety clear.

Mia couldn't help but groan. *I'm sure she has too much on her mind to be hungry, but...I can't win over her stomach if she doesn't eat. What a pickle...*

That's when Matthias noticed the situation. "Patty, if you truly aren't hungry, that's fine. I'll eat all of this castilla myself. But you need to lift your face and look your friend in the eyes."

"Huh?" Patty blinked, then lifted her face to look at Yanna.

"There's no need to force yourself to eat, but I can't condone ignoring your friend's worry." Matthias placed a hand on Patty's head. "My mother once told me that friends... Huh? I can't quite

remember... Ah, that's it. Something about how friends are like castilla when you have an empty stomach. Huh? I suppose my mother may have been a fan of castilla as well."

Matthias's words may have *sounded* wise, but in reality... Anyway, he said them with a grin.

"Ah, that's right. My mother once told me she had visited Perujin. I remember her saying that the castilla was excellent... Aha ha! I see this sweet and our family have quite the deep connection," he muttered. Meanwhile, Mia was watching Patty. With hesitation, she put the snack to her lips, and her cheeks softened.

I see... So Patty likes castilla too. Oho ho! My plan was a perfect success! Mia opened the door at the front of the carriage with a grin.

"What is it, Mia?" said Abel, looking back at her with a kind smile from the coachman's seat.

"My apologies for making you sit there, Abel," responded Mia, an apologetic smile on her face.

He shook his head. "I don't mind at all. It's easier for me to spot anything that might be wrong from here anyway. Plus, it's always nice to get a chance to observe Sir Dion and learn from him."

Abel's dashing smile had Mia's cheeks flushing. "Oh, um, if you'd like, Abel, here..."

"What is it? A mushroom?"

"It's a castilla. Anne and I made it."

"Ah, so it's handmade..."

Mia turned to Ludwig, who was sitting beside Abel. "You should have some too, Ludwig. It's quite delicious, I assure you."

He seemed quite shocked at the suggestion. "You have my deepest thanks, Your Highness. I shall savor the taste with everything I have," he said with a bow.

Chapter 5: Keen Eyes See Through All… Do They, Though?

"So, Her Highness made this castilla herself…"

Upon receiving Mia's gift, Ludwig observed it carefully. The castilla was vaguely mushroom-shaped with a brown cap and a yellow stalk. Sugar had been sprinkled over the top, making it look quite saccharine.

After thoroughly taking in the castilla, Ludwig suddenly took a bite. A lush sweetness spread over his tongue, and the scorch marks left an aromatic, full-bodied scent. It was truly tasty, yet Ludwig couldn't help but scowl.

It is delicious, but it's too sweet for my tastes. The moment that thought crossed his mind, he caught sight of Anne inside the carriage from the corner of his eye. Seeing her enjoy the cake and laughing by Mia's side, he suddenly thought, *How wonderful. I'm glad she was able to eat this castilla by Her Highness's side.*

Ludwig had a vision of Anne asking him for earnest advice. "I'd like to treat Her Highness to some castilla, but do you know where or how I could get some?" she had asked, strained and tormented. Just when had he seen her look so exhausted? He took a moment to consider this question and realized it was a fragment of memory from a world no longer.

That's right. That never happened. She was never in such a state, and yet, it feels so real… Is this the wavering of worlds, a memory from a timeline that has already reached its end? Ludwig scowled and groaned. *I know not what that world was like, but it did not seem to be a happy one…*

The emotions those memories left behind were bitter, and Ludwig wished to never feel them again. Thus, he made a silent resolve. *I must protect this world no matter what.*

"Is something wrong, Sir Ludwig?"

He looked up to find Abel watching him curiously. "No… I was simply trying to determine if there were any dangers I had

overlooked."

Ludwig had thoroughly prepared for this undercover journey. He assigned six squads of the Princess Guard to the task, having four lie in wait farther up the road while two accompanied them at a distance. Additionally, he had Ka Aima and her warrior wolf Hasuki on the lookout as well. He had mobilized as many forces as possible that would still prevent drawing too much attention. As for the personnel loss the provision shipments had suffered, the private forces of Duke Redmoon had stepped up to fill the hole. The connections Mia had made at the horsemanship tournament were already proving fruitful.

Rather than predicting this situation, she was likely trying to procure backup forces for the Princess Guard. Still, she truly is amazing.

Thus, Ludwig had prepared the ultimate setup, but he couldn't completely wipe away his worries.

"Ha ha! I don't think you've got too much to worry about." A knight—Dion Alaia, the Empire's Finest—had brought his horse close to the carriage. He was dressed in tattered leather armor to disguise himself as an unskilled guard and wore a grin that looked free of worry. "From the outside, we look like a band of unprotected, poor nobles, or maybe a band of merchants who've acquired some wealth. Bandits are the only group who'd be attacking us." He brushed his hand over the sword at its hip. "Plus, we're only on this trip 'cause you thought it'd be safe, right?"

Ludwig responded to his teasing seriously. "Yes. I believe there shouldn't be any problems."

"May I ask why?" asked Abel, his expression serious.

Ludwig adjusted his glasses. "Well, it is impossible to determine where the Chaos Serpents have slithered into. Their plots of destruction are scrupulous, and they read the hearts of, manipulate, and rule their enemies. This makes them quite dangerous. However..." He paused for a moment. "We mustn't forget that they are still human."

"And why does that matter?"

"While we don't know where they may be hiding, it would be wrong to assume they are everywhere. It may sound obvious, but it means it is possible to make moves outside of their sights." Ludwig brought a hand to his chin. "The Chaos Serpents are an idea, and thus, they do not organize. Slipping into existing organizations, creating rot from the inside, and using them as pawns is their creed.

Therefore, I don't think there can be many who wholeheartedly accept their ideas with devotion. Of course, there are skilled assassins like the wolfmaster within their ranks, but...Sir Dion or the Princess Guard should prove enough to take care of the likes of them."

Dion shrugged. "No matter who I'm fighting, I'll at least be able to buy enough time for the little princess to escape."

"I see. No one could best Sir Dion alone, and as the members of the Princess Guard are so skilled, they should be able to protect Mia from any assassinations..." Abel nodded.

"And most importantly...our enemies are not well protected. If they were to attack us, the best they could do is carry out an assassination or hide among our ranks. They are disadvantaged in real battles. While they may have determined our current moves, it would be difficult for them to react."

"You're right. They may be dangerous, but they're not all-powerful. They have strengths and weaknesses, and if we are aware of them, we have no need to fear them blindly," said Abel, his arms crossed.

Ludwig nodded. "Indeed. While we must remain vigilant against them, we shouldn't make them out to be bigger than they are. I believe it is necessary to correctly judge one's strength whether they're friend or foe."

Abel laughed. "So your sharp eyes judge everyone! It's hard to avoid your observations, I see." His praise was honest, but it left Ludwig feeling a bit embarrassed, so he tried to play it off.

"Perhaps it's thanks to these glasses," he said, pushing them up his nose.

Chapter 6: The Castle Town of Clauvert

Just as Ludwig predicted, the group encountered no obstacles at any of the villages serving as relay points and safely arrived at Clauvert, the castle town of the former Clausius domain. The ramparts were quite low, but once they had entered, it looked like any old castle town. It was as large as could be expected for one ruled by a marquess, but there was something unrefined about its citizens.

"Hm... So this is the Clausius domain," said Mia, looking out from the carriage. "It's quite peaceful, and...normal."

Mia was caught slightly off guard by this. She was headed for the manor of the cursed House Clausius, after all! The story had left her frightened as a kid, and ever since, she had never wanted to set foot near it. She had been prepared to see rivers of blood and walking corpses, and in her eyes *alone*, the scene before her appeared quite shocking.

Well, I suppose House Clausius having deep relations with the Serpents doesn't necessarily mean the town they ruled would be suspicious. The most terrible thing about the Serpents was how difficult they were to find. A devil never wore the easily recognizable face of one; they casually approached like a friend. The same could be said about the Serpents.

Mia braced herself and glanced at Patty. "Do you recognize any of this?"

She stood up and made her way toward Mia. After examining the outside scene for a moment, she finally spoke up. "I've seen that place before, but..." She seemed pained. "It seems so...old..." she said, her head tilted.

"Hm..." Mia swallowed her temptation to state so much was obvious and instead simply nodded.

"Shall we head straight for the manor, Your Highness?" asked Ludwig from the coachman's seat.

Mia took a moment to think. “Is that all right with you, father?” She looked to Matthias, who should have the ultimate say in this situation. This time, she was giving him some reverence, but...

“You planned this trip, Mia, so I shall leave it to you. Oh, but...” He stroked his chin and glanced at Patty. “It seems Patty has visited this place before. Why don’t we walk around town first?” Then, he started stretching his shoulders. “This long trip has left my body feeling a bit heavy. I’d like to walk around myself.”

“I see,” said Mia with a nod. *He probably just wants to play in town with me, but...* She recalled how he looked at Patty. *Perhaps he’s thinking of her? It would be quite rare for him to do such a thing, but...in any case, this is a good opportunity. It should help her recognize that this is the world of the future.*

Mia looked back at the coachman’s seat. “We’d like to walk around town. Can I ask you to deal with the guards, Ludwig?”

“Understood, Your Highness,” agreed Ludwig before stopping the carriage just outside the main street.

As soon as Mia hopped outside the carriage, Dion approached. “Sir and madam, please don’t do anything careless and listen to my orders. I’d like you to stick close by, if possible.”

Matthias responded with a gloomy nod. “Well, if our guard has ordered it, that’s what we shall do. Here, come close, Mia. And don’t be afraid to call me ‘papa’...”

“Sure, *father*. Everyone else heard, right? Don’t run off on your own, and please do as our guard says.”

They followed “big sister” Mia’s commands and headed straight for the shop Patty had said she remembered. It was a tailor’s.

“Um...” called out Patty, standing at the entrance.

“Coming! Do you need something, young lady?” A friendly older person appeared, rubbing their hands together.

“Um, where’s the shopkeeper...?”

“Why, I’m the shopkeeper. Do you need anything?” they asked, sinking to their knees to look her straight in the eyes.

Patty stared back at them and went pale. “You really... What’s...happening?” she muttered. Then, she dashed off.

“Wait! Patty! Don’t go off alone!” In a panic, Mia went to chase after her, but she was stopped by Yanna.

“Please stay here. I’ll go.” As soon as those words had left her mouth, she had run so far off she could no longer be seen.

“Let’s go as well. She’s likely headed...”

“Yes, you’re right. I’d have liked to take some more detours and try some of the local delicacies, but…” Mia’s expression was serious. “It’s time we head for the old manor of the Clausiuses.”

Chapter 7: Mia's Seeds Sprout —Sing the Praises of the Great Sage!—

Meanwhile, at the Greenmoons'...

"Sion! It's been so long!"

Sion and Tiona had reunited with Echard in the room Esmerelda had led them to. The younger boy ran up to Sion and stood with his back as straight as a pin. Seeing such a lively smile on his brother, Sion couldn't help but pat his chest with relief.

"I'm glad you've been well, Echard."

"Yes. Thank you very much for coming all this way when you're so busy, Sion. And thank you too, Keithwood."

Echard led them inside the room with a childish grin. With a nod, Sion stepped inside. Tiona and Esmerelda had gone to share some tea between the two of them out of consideration for the brothers, and thus, Keithwood was the only one in Sion's attendance. He sat down in the seat Echard showed him to and discovered tea had already been prepared. Someone must have guessed what time they'd arrive and made it.

That's right. I recall the Greenmoons having quite a skilled maid. Sion fondly looked back on the memories he shared with Nina on the abandoned island as he took a sip of his tea. It was from neither Sunkland nor Tearmoon, and it had a rich yet unfamiliar taste.

"I don't believe I've had this before..."

"I hear the Greenmoons have many connections abroad and participate in trade. This blend is from overseas."

"I see. This seems like a good place for you to learn."

"Yes, I'm treated quite well here." Echard directed his eyes to his cup. What did he see in its ripples? Was it fond memories of his days in Sunkland, or visions of his past sins? He drank it down in a single gulp and returned his gaze to Sion. "That's right... I believe I'm starting to understand what you meant back then."

"Hm?"

"About Princess Mia Luna Tearmoon." With sparkling eyes,

Echard began to speak of what he had learned at Saint Mia Academy. “Her Highness is as great as our father!” No, what he had been *brainwashed* with!

Sion chuckled. “Isn’t she? Her achievements are so great I can’t even hold a candle to her.”

“You’re just being modest…is what I’d like to say, at least. But now, her accomplishments truly seem so great that’s no longer how it sounds to me. I didn’t know Saint Mia Academy had been built out of a quarrel between the Rudolvon family and Viscount Berman.” Echard began to talk all about what Mia had done for Tearmoon. “I hear she’s made friends from the minority tribe of the Lulus. Do you know them?”

“It’s the tribe Miss Liora is from, and I believe I once heard mention of one when I visited a church in the Newmoon District.”

“That must be him! He’s the grandson of the Lulus’ chief, and Princess Mia saved his life! And Cyril—oh, he’s Miss Tiona’s young brother—told me all about the princess as well. There’s also Selia, a girl who’s really smart but would have never gotten an education had Princess Mia never seen the promise in her. I met a whole lot of other people too.”

Thus, Echard continued to passionately speak of Mia’s achievements. Even Sion hadn’t heard some of the stories, leading to a lively discussion. Incidentally, some of those stories had been quite embellished, yet neither of the boys doubted them in the slightest.

“Ah, that’s right. Something similar happened at Saint-Noel’s. Mia…” Not wanting to be outshined by his brother, Sion began to tell stories of his own. He told Echard of the recent SEEC program and the incidents in Remno that by now had happened so long ago, making sure to share all sorts of wisdom Mia had spoken. Thus, the two Sunkland princes were locked in a passionate verbal give-and-take of praise for Mia, and none were there to stop their honest plaudits—not even the sensible Keithwood.

Yes… If she’s accomplished so much, her cooking habits can be overlooked. Rather, that horse-shaped bread was quite revolutionary and marvelous looking back on it, no? No. No, no, no. That’s not true, but… Yes, Keithwood had been tricked! The situation was dire!

“I often talk with Miss Esmerelda before bed, and there are many things even she doesn’t know! It leads to some great conversations.”

“I see... Wait. Before bed?” Sion had been happily listening to Echard, but suddenly, a word had drawn his attention.

“Oh, yes. Um... She talks to me until I fall asleep since she’s worried I’ll miss Sunkland. Oh, but I stay in Princess Town during the semester, so that’s only true when we’re on break! She pats my head until I fall asleep too,” said Echard, his cheeks turning red with embarrassment.

Sion couldn’t help but find the sight heartwarming. *I see he’s been able to let some of the weight off his shoulders now that he’s left Sunkland. I hope he grows well and strong surrounded by affable friends and kind elders to look after him.*

But there was someone who saw things differently. *Prince Echard, so you now know the wonders of being spoiled by an older woman. I worry for you...* Given Keithwood’s own experiences, his worry was in the right place.

Still, even he hadn’t realized the true danger. Just what would become of an innocent young boy’s heart after being bombarded by the fake news of the Great Sage’s achievements at school and Mia-maniac Esmerelda’s stories at night? Even a cool, collected man like Keithwood hadn’t realized this threat.

Well, considering those at the top of Saint-Noel Academy were quite the Mia-maniacs, and that even the king and queen of Sunkland had built a false image of the Great Sage in their own minds, it probably didn’t make much of a difference either way.

Chapter 8: Employing Yes-Man Tactics —Romance Edition—

Along the way from the main street of Clauvert that served as the center of town and the old manor of the former local lord, Mia sensed that the atmosphere of the town had slightly changed. *It's as if…everything's gotten darker.* Mia looked around her surroundings and quickly found the reason. *Ah, those trees are blocking the light.*

There were so many trees it was as if they had entered a forest. Vines covered the rows of buildings, making it all around…*creepy*.

The cursed House Clausius… Mia gulped.

"This takes me back! This road hasn't changed at all!" said Matthias cheerfully. "I hated this road so much when I was young that I did my best to avoid it."

"Even you, father?" Impossible! Mia couldn't fathom that her *own* father was so delicate as to let this depressing atmosphere spook him.

"Of course! This hilly road is quite long, and the stairs are hard to climb. I really do wonder why they built it here…"

Urged by his words, Mia once again looked at the gloomy road…or rather, looked *up* it. It was as long as a road leading up a mountain! "I-It's so…"

"Well, I suppose this is the perfect opportunity to get my body back in shape!" he said with a chuckle.

Mia ignored her father's spirited laugh and looked up at the manor dispirited. "Moons, would I love a horse… Horses can take me far away, to the greatest heights." After muttering a line that could have Lin Malong falling in love with her, she sighed.

Well, the more I exercise, the more cake I can eat… If I consider this the necessary work for a lavish dinner, I can handle it. Life is all about how you look at things! Mia glanced at Anne. *I'm going to climb this hill, so I can have a sweet, tasty cake with dinner tonight, right?*

With those thoughts in mind, Mia spoke. "This is going to be some excellent exercise."

Those words put a smile on Anne's face. "It is. We ate all that castilla in the carriage, so this is the perfect chance to work it off."

Huh? How strange... Our calculations don't quite seem to match. Isn't walking up this hill a way to make room for the cake we'll be having later*?*

Mia felt that she and Anne weren't quite on the same page, but Mia was often off when it came to calculations anyway. She began to huff her way up the hill when she noticed Matthias and Bel climbing away as if it were nothing.

"Aha ha! Let's race! You too, Rina! And you're joining, right, Kiryl?" said Bel, as cheerful as could be. Kiryl ran after her.

"They're taking this...so well. Is this...the strength of youth?" asked Mia, ignoring the fact that Matthias was marching away just as lively ahead.

Mia turned behind her to find Citrina sighing and wiping the sweat from her brow. A sudden gust of wind caused her honey-colored hair to dance in the air, and the sun caused it to sparkle. Mia was absolutely charmed.

Sensing Mia's gaze, Citrina flashed her a noble grin. "This hill is quite tiring, isn't it?" she said in her lovely voice.

Hm, how strange. We're equally exhausted, but why does Rina look so lovely?

Obviously, the reason was that Citrina never huffed and puffed or said anything weird like "hupty-doo!" no matter how tired she was. Mia couldn't help but feel that she had lost something fatally important, like...heroine charm, noble dignity, or womanly allure. Still...

"Are you all right, Mia?"

Mia turned around to find Abel watching her with worry. "Yes, I'm fine."

"Yeah? But don't push yourself. If you feel like you're about to fall, I'll support you."

"My, Abel!"

Mia's face lit up and her cheeks turned red. From far away and with half-closed eyes, she'd look adorable. It was enough to make one consider that maybe she had barely passed the bar for being considered a proper heroine! Even if one lacked the proper charm, one could reign supreme as a heroine as long as they were surrounded by people who could find it in them. Mia had created circumstances where all she had to do was react, and Mia's yes-man

tactics shined brilliantly on this romantic moment. Anyways...

"We're almost there. You can do it!"

Cheered on by Abel, Mia continued to climb. Her heart was free from intrusive thoughts as she continued to put one foot in front of the other, and just when she was about to start huffing again, the manor finally came into sight. It stood on the top of the hill, looking down on what was below.

"My, is this the manor of the Clausius family?"

The whisper that spilled from her mouth was a question, but even without an answer, Mia's heart was filled with odd confidence. This was undeniably the home of the cursed House Clausius.

Bathed in the red light of the sun, it stood high in the air, and at first glance, it appeared to be like any Tearmoon mansion. Yet there was something odd about it, as if things didn't quite fit together. For example, there was the roof. Under typical Tearmoon architecture, it should form a proper triangle, but it was instead oddly curved. There were also the windows; while most seemed curiously small, one was huge and made of stained glass, throwing off the balance. Even the pillars seemed to be off somehow. The odd idiosyncrasies of this building left it feeling unbalanced, inspiring anxiety. It was as if a grotesque castle simply wore the skin of Tearmoon architecture—a skin that couldn't fully conceal the structure's malice.

Mia's father had said he despised climbing the treacherous hill, but now, Mia thought his words must have been a half lie. *I really don't want to enter this manor. It seems like it might actually be cursed...*

Mia looked up at the manor and gulped.

Chapter 9: Rousing the Spirit of Adventurers!

Mia noticed that Bel and Matthias, who had arrived before her, were standing still in front of the mansion. Clearly, the manor's appearance had captured their attention just like it had Mia's. She also noticed Patty, who stood frozen in a corner of the garden. Patty's eyes were trained on a large tree rustling in the wind.

When Mia approached, Patty spoke to her in a voice so quiet it was barely perceptible. "I-I planted a tree here with Hannes..." She must have been speaking to Yanna. She pointed at the tree before her and continued, her tone crestfallen. "He said it would be big in thirty years, so we promised to live until then...but..." A huge tree was already before her. "What's happening? I don't understand... I don't..."

After choking out those words, Patty covered her face and fell to the ground. Yanna crouched beside her and rubbed her back.

"We better let her rest. Anne? Could I leave this to you?"

Anne nodded, her expression serious. She approached Patty.

"Rina will go too," Citrina added.

Mia whispered in her ear. "I believe I told you this before, but Patty's received an education from the Serpents, and the Clausius family has deep ties with them. So, I want you to..."

"Understood. Rina shall be careful just in case."

"Right... That's good, but more importantly, I'd like your advice as someone who has escaped the Serpents' clutches."

"Huh?" Citrina stared back, her expression blank.

Mia looked her in the eyes. "I want to save her from the Serpents. Even if she must one day return to them, I want her to have the strength to make it through that. I wish it from the bottom of my heart."

Citrina's expression was calm as she listened. "I see. I'm not sure what Rina can do, but I will do all I can."

Leaving those words, Citrina went to Patty's side. Mia watched

her go before turning her gaze back to the manor. “But moons, does someone live here?”

“No, the manor is looked after by the Azure Moon Ministry, but I hear the person in charge lives in a house below the hill. They want to keep it in proper repair so that a new local lord can take control of these lands whenever.”

“I see...”

Hearing this, Mia realized what she had been sensing. The emptiness emanating from the manor, the atmosphere of death it exuded... It was what overflowed from houses that had been abandoned. *It’s as if the manor itself has died*, she thought. But the moment this sinister idea made its way to her mind, she shivered.

“Incidentally, Your Highness, is it safe to assume you will be staying the night here?”

“Huh?”

This question had Mia staring back at Ludwig blankly. She had been under the impression that they would be staying in an inn, and thus, the suggestion had caught her off guard. However, it made sense. Having been ordered to head to the Clausius manor, Ludwig would obviously assume that she wished to examine the place, and staying there would be an effective method of doing so.

“I sent Gilbert Bouquet to make such preparations, so the house is ready for your stay. I believe he will come to make his report later...” Ludwig continued talking before Mia had the chance to correct him. Panicked, she tried to think of a way to change their course.

H-H-How could I possibly stay here?! This isn’t funny!

Her goal in coming here had been to show the manor to Patty. She had already been confronted with evidence that this was the future. Hadn’t they already done enough?!

“Personally, I have no qualms about staying in this haunted manor—I mean, the former Clausius home. However, the person calling the shots on this trip is unfortunately not me, but my father. We must ask his opinion.” Mia trotted over to Matthias, but for some reason, the look on his face was one of excitement. “F-Father?”

“You’re finally here! Bel has been saying she wishes to explore the manor.”

“She *what*?!” Mia glanced over at Bel and saw her and Kiryl pumping their fists in the air. Adventurer Bel’s blood was boiling!

“It’s been so long since my last visit. How nostalgic! The thought of spending the night here fills me with joy!” His face was so gleeful, it looked like he wasn’t thinking about the old days at all.

Bel must have invited him on her adventure. Matthias had quite the soft spot for Bel, after all.

“Plus, it seems that Patty has some connection to the manor…”

Mia looked up at his eyes to find them now full of emotion. *Hm… Given how he treats Bel and Patty, he may have a vague idea as to who they really are…* thought Mia for a moment. But then…

“Let’s go, papa!”

Matthias chuckled. “Wait, Bel! You’ll trip running around like that. You be careful too, Kiryl!”

“It seems he was just happy to be called ‘papa.’” Exasperated, Mia returned her gaze to the manor. “Well, you heard him, Ludwig. We’ll be spending the night here, but make sure our protection is secure! So secure that even a ghost won’t be able to make it inside!” Her expression was awfully serious.

“As you wish, Your Highness,” said Ludwig with a bow.

Chapter 10: His Name Comes From…?

Oddly, it was Patty's former room that Anne brought her to.

"Let's rest here for now, Miss Patty."

Seeing the room once again thrust Patty into turmoil—it looked completely different to how she remembered it. *This is… Why?*

Had she been in an unfamiliar, foreign country, she would have been able to wrap her mind around her situation. However, the place she had been brought to only retained a semblance of the old Clausius domain, and it only worsened her confusion. The manor was devoid of life, and her brother Hannes was gone. The tailor was an old man, and the city seemed desolate. *What's happening?*

Patty couldn't understand. At first, she thought this was part of her training as a Serpent; as one of their spies, they had been conditioning her to act correctly no matter the circumstances. However, that wasn't the case, so just what explained this situation? Where was she? Countless questions swirled in her mind, clinging to her skin like fog and obscuring her vision. The unstable world around her wavered as if it were anxious itself. But Yanna was still rubbing her shoulders, and the warmth coming from her dear friend's hands at her back was the only thing Patty was certain of in this world shrouded by mist.

Friends are like castilla when you have an empty stomach… The words that strange man had earlier spoken made their way back into her mind. The man claimed to be the emperor, and his name was…

"Excuse me." A voice resounded from outside the door, and the maid named Anne opened it, frazzled. Standing there was the "emperor." He looked around the room with half-closed eyes. "This is… Ah, how nostalgic. It's the room my mother once used."

I think his name was… That's right. It's Matthias. Remembering this, she looked Matthias in the eyes and couldn't help but feel a tinge of nostalgic joy. "Matthias" was a name from her far away past when her mother was still alive. It had been the name of their dog, a precious member of her family who had passed away from

illness. She couldn't help but feel a strange sense of kinship with this man who shared her old dog's name.

But people call him "Your Majesty"... What's happening?

Patty was once again brought back to her thoughts. As far as she knew, the current emperor—as well as his son—didn't look like the man before her. While they shared some resemblance, she was certain they were different people. But then what in the moons was happening?

Matthias grinned at Patty as she racked her brains. "You seemed to be out of sorts earlier. Are you all right?"

Patty only responded with a slight nod. Yanna panicked to answer for her. "U-U-Um, Patty has to live far away from her little brother, and he's the only family she has left. She's been very worried about him, so... We're really sorry if she does anything o-offensive." Her face was taut with nerves as if she really were a commoner speaking to the real emperor.

Matthias, on the other hand, brushed his hand over her hair. "There's no need to be so anxious. Right now, I'm supposed to be your father. Others will see straight through us if you act so nervous," he said with dignity. "Plus, you all have received the favor of my dear daughter Mia, so you have my favor as well. Even on the small chance I treat you poorly, I'd just be making Mia angry. I could never do anything of the sort!" He gave a gleeful grin. "But I see... If he is the only family you have, then your situation is similar to Yanna and Kiryl's. What of your parents?"

"They're gone. They passed away," said Patty with a small shake of her head. Currently, Marquess Clausius was her "father," though she didn't think of him as one, and he likely didn't view himself that way either.

"Hm..." Matthias folded his arms and groaned as if pondering something. "I know that friends are important, and I believe I know the importance of family as well. How about it? Why don't we become a real family?"

"Huh?" Patty could only blink, but Matthias shook his head up and down with glee.

"Don't you think adopting you all is a wonderful idea? You would never have to worry about meals or your futures. Ah, that's right! In that case, I'll adopt Bel as well and..."

This idea was ridiculous.

"Your Majesty, I'm not quite sure that..." Citrina jumped in to

protest, for as the daughter of an eminent noble, she was the only one present who could possibly stop Matthias. However...

"Ah, you're right. It would complicate the matter of the heir. I'll leave that to the chancellor. I doubt Mia will oppose this plan; it seems like a wonderful—"

"Why?" It was Yanna who cut him off. "Why would you go so out of your way to help us?"

Patty understood exactly why Yanna would ask such a question. She had the same doubts when House Clausius agreed to adopt her...and the answer had left her in despair. Patty reflexively looked into Matthias's eyes, but there didn't seem to be much behind them.

"Why, that's obvious! It's just a whim!" He spoke as if that answer was natural. "Or perhaps, it's the arrogance of those born to be haves rather than have-nots." He wore a self-deprecating grin. "If you came across a beautiful ant stuck in a spider's web, wouldn't you wish to save it? If you found an injured rabbit in the woods, wouldn't you treat its wounds out of sympathy? It's the same. That's all. I don't think of the spider who will starve or the fox who would make the rabbit its prey, and I have no intention of saving the powerless weak who suffer where I can't see. This is all a foolish emperor like myself can do. It's arrogance, and there's no complicated reason behind it. It's neither kindness nor consideration, but hubris and whims. Thus, there's no need to feel indebted to me."

Having said all that, his grin grew genuine. "But my daughter is different, isn't she? She doesn't use her power for herself, but to change this country—to change the world. She uses it to save as many as she can. She's much better than I." His chest was puffed out, revealing the pride he had in his beloved daughter.

Hearing his words, Patty couldn't help but think, *He's proud of his daughter for trying to save as many as she can... He must be a good person too.* But at the same time, she couldn't help but think about how saving Hannes required sending such men to the pits of despair.

"I need to go to the bathroom..." Leaving with those words, Patty quietly exited the room. For some reason, she couldn't withstand hearing him talk any longer, nor did she want to be beside her worried friend. Her feet shaky and her heart led by something unknown, she headed for...

Chapter 11: Princess Mia Is Brilliant (This Hasn't Happened for a While...)

Mia and the group stepped inside the old manor of the Clausiuses. Patty, Anne, and Yanna were already inside, and the members of the Princess Guard serving them had quickly taken up posts throughout the manor. Mia watched the backs of these men as they headed inside and once again looked around the mansion. *This place really is quite creepy...*

The interior was a mesh of off-putting idiosyncrasies much like the exterior. The hallway was so slightly slanted it was near imperceptible, and it twisted like a slithering snake, obscuring what lay on the other end. The ceiling was disturbingly high, making it oddly intimidating. Finally, there were so few windows that the air in the room felt stagnant, as if too long a stay would induce sickness —or perhaps, simply eat away at one's heart.

Apparently, Patty's brother Hannes spent his days fervently reading through The Book of Those who Crawl the Earth *here.* The man had spent his days absorbed in this sinister book until he one day suddenly disappeared, and somehow, he had done so averting the surveillance of Gerta and the other Serpents in the manor. Just how had he managed that? *This mansion didn't consume him, did it?* This imaginative thought was enough to thoroughly frighten Mia.

"Wh-Where is Anne? Anne? Aaaanne?" Mia was about to go searching for her when a voice suddenly called out.

"Ah, Princess Mia."

The voice startled her, and she jumped into the air. Timidly, she turned around to find...

"Ah, Aima."

Yes, it was Aima, who had been hiding in the shadows to serve as one of their guards. She grinned proudly and triumphantly. "It appears that this manor is devoid of anyone suspicious," she reported.

"I see. What excellent news. Thank you, Aima."

She laughed. “For me and Hasuki, finding a concealed man is simple. You may ask me to do so anytime.” She now puffed out her chest as if this feat had further gotten to her head. But then, she suddenly turned around, her expression troubled.

My! So even Aima finds this place quite creepy... Mia began to feel a sense of kinship with the girl. “This place feels sinister, doesn’t it, Aima?”

She didn’t quite seem to follow Mia’s thinking. “I think nothing of the manor. However...I encountered Dion Alaia at the end of the hall earlier. Such instances are bad for the heart.”

“I see.” Aima’s lasting anxiety when it came to Dion made Mia’s sense of kinship grow even stronger. *His bloodlust really is bad for the heart. I understand her completely*, she thought with a nod. Then, she grinned. “But it’s rare that Dion would suddenly turn his blade against someone.”

“D-Does that mean he would turn his blade against me as long as it was *not* sudden?!” asked Aima, her eyes open wide. She shivered.

“Oh... Perhaps that wasn’t the best way of putting it. It’s true that earning the hostility of Dion would mean your end even if he fought you fair and square and didn’t resort to measures like surprise attacks, but it’s quite rare for him to do so.”

“B-But if it is ‘quite rare,’ that means it must happen.”

“No, it’s quite seldom an occurrence.”

“Then, there is a slight chance it will?”

“Hm...” Mia took a moment to ponder. Quite honestly, she should have just told Aima that it never happened, but given he had chopped off her head in the previous timeline, Mia couldn’t make that promise. “Ah, that’s it! Why don’t you ask Rina how to deal with him?”

“What do you mean? She may be skilled in the way of poisons, but she should be powerless against a man such as Dion Alaia...” said Aima. She was unsure what to make of Mia’s words.

“Not at all. As a Serpent, she once faced off against Dion as his enemy. But now, they’re so close they can casually tease each other. She must have a secret technique to overcome the fear Dion inspires!” Her words were forceful.

Aima gave a meek nod. “I see. I shall ask her later.” Then, she walked off, keeping her guard up and making sure to look every which way to avoid any Dion surprises.

Mia sighed. “Somehow, seeing Aima has helped me calm down...” Mia couldn’t help but marvel at how being in the presence of someone more fearful than yourself could lead to such a collected presence of mind. Then, she decided to head to her room for the night.

“My apologies, Your Highness. Do you have a moment?” Ludwig stopped her. Behind him stood a young man with a gregarious grin.

“What is it, Ludwig?”

“Gilbert Bouquet, the man investigating House Clausius, is here to make his report. I have brought him with me.”

Mia gave the man a few quick words of appreciation. “Well, then. I’m sure having dinner with my father and catering to his other whims will keep me busy later, so I better hear this report now,” she said with folded arms and a nod.

For now, the group headed to the room Mia would be staying in, which appeared to be the study of Marquess Clausius. It had a massive desk, shelves crammed with books, and a small round table meant to entertain guests. Mia thought it seemed like the perfect room to do some work in between snack breaks.

There was always the portrait of a virile young man on the wall. He seemed to be in his late teens and overflowing with the energy of youth. Mia wondered if the man depicted could be Hannes.

I wonder what sort of man Great-Uncle Hannes was...

While Mia was pondering this over, Ludwig’s fellow protegee, Gilbert Bouquet, had taken a knee.

“Oh, there’s no need for that, Mister, um...Bouquet?”

“If it is all right, I would like you to call me Gilbert, or simply Gil.”

“I see. In that case, Gil, please take a seat in one of the chairs and give your report.” Mia glanced over at Ludwig. “And if you have any questions, please ask them as well. I’m sure there is plenty you will notice that I will not.”

“Yes, Your Highness. Though I highly doubt that is true...” said Ludwig with a bitter smile as Gil sat down next to him.

Once Mia had taken her own seat at the table, Gilbert began his report. “Just as Ludwig ordered, two guards and I investigated House Clausius. Since matters of the family are all matters of the

past, there was a limit to what we could discover through asking around. Thus, I wanted to see how they would react…"

"So you leaked the fact that there was someone investigating the family?" asked Ludwig with questioning eyes.

Gil responded with a bitter grin and a scratch of his cheek. "Yes, but I never imagined it would lead to a kidnapping attempt. I'm ashamed. I was certain that if they reacted, it would be directed at me." He now hung his shoulders.

Mia shook her head. "It would have been clear that Letizia had been kidnapped sooner or later, and since we were able to prevent it, there's nothing for you to be ashamed of. But more importantly, I'd like you to refrain from doing anything that puts you in danger in the future."

Mia couldn't imagine any information that would be equal in worth to a man working under them and trusted by Ludwig. She wanted to avoid the folly of losing any personnel vital to her yes-man ways.

"I once thought that the wolfmaster—Ka Maku—was the greatest threat our enemies had, but it seems there is a man who surpasses his strength. We must be careful," said Mia.

Those words had Gil's mouth agape, but he quickly fixed it with a shake of his head. "Thank you for your concern. I'll make sure to refrain from doing such things in the future."

Mia nodded back at him before urging the conversation forward.

"Right. Well, um… Marquess Hannes Clausius disappeared around twenty years ago, five years before Empress Patricia passed away."

"My, so it was before I was born." That was why she didn't remember. If they had never met, she would obviously have no memories of the man. Well, Mia often forgot about even the people she *did* meet if she didn't think much of them, but anyways…

"Then could that portrait be of Marquess Hannes when he was young?"

For some reason, Gil answered her with a mischievous grin. "No. Apparently, that portrait was painted right before his disappearance."

"Right before…? That would mean he was in his forties, no? But that's clearly the face and body of someone much younger."

"Apparently, it was one of the things that gave credibility to the

story of the cursed House Clausius. I heard all sorts of different rumors, like how he had sold his soul to a devil to keep himself from aging, or that he drank the blood of his subjects to retain his youth, but..." His face suddenly grew serious. "After looking into it, it seems that his disappearance was most likely due to assassination."

"Assassination... Then it's just as I thought," said Mia with a sigh. She began to consider how to break this news to Patty. *This would have been much easier had he been alive. Ugh, how can I explain this? Oh, but if the assassin was related to the Serpents, I might be able to use that to get her on our side.* As she mulled things over, she urged Gil to continue. "Do you know who was responsible? Was it the Serpents?"

Gil responded with a troubled groan. "They never caught the perpetrator... Rather, it's still unclear whether he was really assassinated, but..." He paused for a moment. "We're still trying to confirm this, but we believe the Yellowmoons were likely involved."

"Moons! Then Duke Lorenz played a part? Hm, but that means..." Mia thought back to what he had once told her—that he and Citrina had never assassinated anyone. "Could Marquess Hannes have—"

Suddenly, there was a loud thump from the other side of the door.

"Huh?" Mia shivered. This was a mysterious noise coming from the manor of the cursed House Clausius, after all! It would surely be near impossible *not* to be fearful in such circumstances!

Ludwig and Gil hurried to open the door, where they found...

"P-P-P-Patty? D-Did you hear all that?" Seeing Patricia standing there as white as a sheet left Mia with a *bad* feeling. Without thinking, she approached Patty, but with every step forward she took, Patty took a step backward. Her blood had completely drained from her face, and her eyes were filled with despair.

Oh, she definitely *heard us. And considering her current state, she must have been listening to all our talk about Hannes being assassinated!* The moment Mia realized this, she began to feel dizzy, and the sensation came with a shudder. *Moons, was that a disturbance in the timeline?!*

Mia felt like the experience she just had was similar to what she had felt during her experience with Barbara, though in reality, her

dizziness was just the vertigo the chickenhearted often felt in the face of a crisis. This was still the same timeline, but anyways...

Th-This is terrible! Did the past change? But how?

Mia put her thinking cap on. Climbing up the hill earlier had depleted her sugar reserves, but she diligently kept her brain moving. She was just like a sprinter holding their breath before the last spurt to the goal as she burned all the sugar she had to keep her train of thought chugging along.

Patty doesn't know that Lorenz has never killed anyone, but what would happen if Patty began to despise the Yellowmoons for assassinating her brother? The Yellowmoons would be done! At least, that's safe to assume, right? Mia knew well that not everyone could be as magnanimous as Mia Luna Tearmoon. And while it was quite rare, this ended up being the truth; no one *could* be as magnanimous (read: chickenhearted) as her.

If my grandmother became a fierce woman dead set on revenge, what would happen to the present?

Urged by this sense of foreboding, Mia took another step forward. "P-Patty?"

However, Patty didn't so much as look at her before she turned around and ran.

"Ah! Wait! Patty!" Mia ran after her in a panic. For a moment, she considered asking Ludwig and the others to do the same, but she quickly thought better of the idea. *I have no idea how a change in the past could affect them. Until I know how Patty has affected the others, I can't ask them for help.*

Were those around her friend or foe? If the past had been rewritten, she had no way of making that distinction. Thus...

"I'll go after Patty. The rest is in your hands." Those were the words she left them with.

Ludwig gave a strong nod as if trying to comfort her. "Please leave it to us," he stated with conviction.

With a sigh of moderate relief, Mia dashed out of the room. *It seems that Ludwig hasn't changed very much.* Mia's brains were often in a state of rest, but when faced with danger, that occasionally somewhat improved, and faced with such a dire situation, her brains were currently working better than ever. Smoke had already begun to billow from her ears.

Patty has yet to return to the past, so the present can't have changed too much. Patty was still before her, but her influence would only

have its greatest effect once she returned to her own time. But then what explained the effect she was having on the present? *Does this mean that just like it's certain that she'll one day return to the past, the things that are certain to affect that past can cause ripples in the timeline now? For example, it would make sense that the guillotine timeline would begin to shift the moment my return to the past became certain. I have absolutely no interest in getting beheaded, after all!*

Mia kept her body moving as her head was thinking. If that theory was correct, the root cause of ripples in the timeline could be divided into two categories: things that Patty absolutely had to change once she returned, and things that would be easy for her to change once she returned. For Mia, the road to the guillotine was something she absolutely had to change, but it wasn't something that was easy to change. Patty must have a similar something she felt an absolute need to alter once she returned to the past, and likely, that was the kind of thing that was hard to influence.

And the one thing that falls into both categories is the Yellowmoons! If she heard that they were responsible for assassinating her brother, then... If Patty was dead set on doing something about this, what effect would that have on history? Just as she was mulling that over, she was once again assaulted by vertigo. Had the past changed once again?!

"Oh, but this is different. I've just used my head too much." Thinking too hard had given Mia a fever. Doing what one wasn't accustomed to doing was truly dangerous. "All this effort won't be worth it unless I get something sweet for dessert later..."

Climbing up that hill and chasing after Patty had done a number on Mia, and yet, she kept her feet moving. But as she was chasing after Patty, someone suddenly appeared before her—a young girl with a smile sweet as a wildflower.

"R-R-Rina?!"

The daughter of Duke Yellowmoon watched Mia curiously, and what she carried was enough to nearly elicit a scream from Mia; it was a mysterious vial. *M-Moons! Is that poison?!* Mia gulped. *H-Has she returned to her ways of evil?* Mia's thinking was simple: Patty surely had a vendetta against the Yellowmoons. *She must despise them for killing her brother! She surely took revenge somehow!*

Considering that Citrina was currently before Mia, it was safe to assume that Patty hadn't completely ruined the Yellowmoons, but she surely hadn't ever offered them any kind words. Lorenz had

said that the comforting words of Mia's grandmother had supported him, but if Patty viewed the man as her brother's murderer, there was no way she had offered those words in this timeline. There was a strong possibility that Lorenz had now truly tainted his hands, and that Citrina had done the same.

Eeeeeeek! Wh-What is she doing with that vial?!

If the Yellowmoons were now obedient to the Serpents' wiles, Mia was naturally now their enemy. She could very well be Citrina's target!

A-And why are you headed to her of all people, Patty?! Mia couldn't leave her be in her current frantic state, and thus, she had no choice but to go after the girl. "Wait, Patty! Rina's not..."

"Rina's not safe right now," had been what she was trying to say, but Patty had clung to Citrina before she could get the words out.

"Oh, perfect timing. I have some medicine to help you calm down."

However, Patty cut off those kind words. "Miss Yellowmoon... Please kill me."

"Huh...?"

"I-I have nothing to live for, so...please kill me!" She clung to Citrina with all she had.

Hearing of Hannes's death had devastated the poor girl. She never doubted what she had heard eavesdropping on Mia. The Yellowmoons were a family who carried out the first emperor's ambitions through assassination. Though the number of people who knew this in Tearmoon were minuscule, someone who did had said that Hannes had been assassinated. That truth had been the finishing blow to Patty's turbulent state of mind.

She no longer had the remaining faculties to doubt those words; her heart was at its limit. The wizened yet familiar maid, the changed manor of the Clausiuses, the tree she had planted with Hannes in the garden...not to mention those who had treated her kindly, and the fact that she would one day have to make victims of them. In order to save Hannes, Patty had decided to become a Serpent and bring misery to all, even those who treated her kindly, and those who called her their friend. Still...Hannes—the boy she had done all this for—had died. He had been killed. What left did she have to live for?

Living as a Serpent was meaningless, yet she couldn't call Yanna a friend, nor could she take up Matthias's offer to adopt her; deep in her heart, she had always intended on making them her victims, after all. She was willing to sacrifice everyone for the sake of the Serpents—for the sake of Hannes. Dominating Patty's heart was regret and deep resignation. In the end, she had committed evil and clung to the power of the Serpents to save her brother, but it had all been for naught, and now that she had lost everything, the one thought that remained was. *Can't it be over? There's no reason left for me to live.*

"Patty..." Mia watched over the crestfallen girl. Why hadn't the past changed? The only explanation was that even once she returned to the past, she had done nothing to the Yellowmoons—her will to do even that much had been broken.

"I see I should explain everything quickly..."

Mia needed to inform her that this was the future, that Hannes was still alive, and that she was Patty's grandchild. The list was endless and overflowed with things Mia still wanted to get in proper order, but for now...

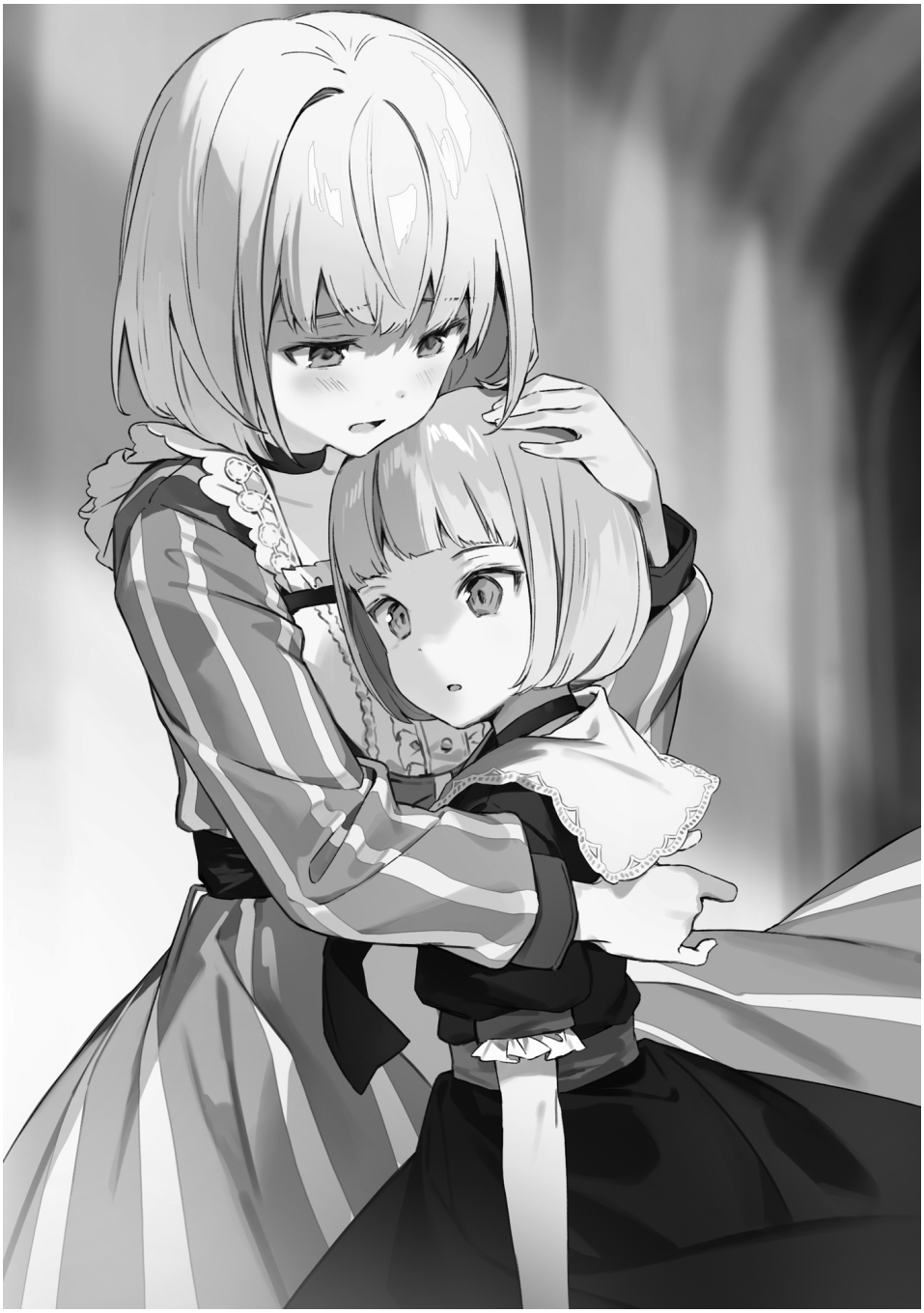
Quietly, softly, Mia approached Patty and embraced her small frame. She held her tight, wanting to make sure she couldn't go anywhere or disappear.

"It's all right, Patty. Everything will be all right..."

Someone had once done the same for Mia. It had been the day she alone had to walk up to the guillotine, and it had been the only warmth supporting her as the fear threatened to break her. Mia now clung to Patty in an attempt to recreate what Anne had done for her that day.

"You're fine... Everything will be just fine..."

She repeated those words over and over in a small whisper, as if trying to convince herself as well.



Chapter 12: Bel's Adventuring Squad Jumps into Action!

We now slightly rewind the clock. After Patty ran from the room, Citrina held back Yanna from following after her. "I don't think having a friend care for her is the right move."

Then, Citrina left, leaving Yanna, Anne, and Matthias behind. However, no awkward silence ensued, as two new intruders soon made their way inside. "Oh! Great—I mean, papa! This is where you were."

It was Bel and Kiryl, and while the latter was usually a shy and docile boy, he was currently thoroughly enjoying a minor journey led by Adventuring Princess Bel.

"If it isn't Kiryl and Bel! Has your adventure yielded any results?"

Bel sagged her shoulders. "Well, I thought this manor looked super interesting, but most of these rooms are empty..."

Bel always wanted her adventures to be fruitful; she was the type who was always after unusual treasures or tasty snacks. Unlike Mia, who was the type to always lie around in bed while munching on such snacks, Bel could be considered quite healthy. Anyways...

"I see. Hm..." Matthias folded his arms and considered her dilemma seriously! It was rare that this man thought so hard as to furrow his brow over politics; this was an expression mostly reserved for picking out Mia's birthday presents or the perfect surprise for her birthday festival. "Indeed, a manor that has lost its lord and servants is bound to have many empty rooms."

A long time had passed since Hannes Clausius, the lord of this land, had disappeared. It was perfectly natural that those who looked after the manor had gotten rid of any unnecessary articles after such time.

"But yes... There may be some things left in the lord's quarters. All right!" Matthias dramatically stood up, highlighting the fact that he had thought of the perfect idea. "Follow me, you two. Oh, and

Yanna can come as well. Let's explore this manor!" Then, he turned to Anne, who had tried to accompany him in a panic. "Ah, you stay with Mia, Anne."

"Huh? Oh, but..."

"I'm sure Mia will have some troubles without her personal maid by her side," said Matthias with a chuckle. Half of his thinking came from his policy of putting Mia before himself—he was a fellow follower of Mia First thinking. The other half, of course, came from wanting to play with the children to his heart's desire. The efforts of Empress Patricia had come to a head! The current emperor was a truly cheerful, jolly man, and while it did call into question whether there was something important she had forgotten to instill in him...there was no need to sweat the details. He rushed through the hallway and practically skipped up the stairs. Unlike Mia, such actions only required a small amount of his effort; training with Duke Redmoon had proven fruitful.

Thus, they headed deep inside the manor, straight for the private quarters of the local lord of this land, Hannes. As soon as Matthias placed his hand on the heavy doors, they opened with little resistance. The door's willingness left Bel questioning whether it was really okay to use the private room of a marquess for the adventuring make-believe of children, even if there were treasures to be discovered inside.

Just kidding! None present considered such common sense. As emperor, Matthias was the man with the most influence in the whole country, and he had a soft spot for Bel. He wanted to make her happy, which meant there was no reason to hesitate.

"That's right. Ha ha ha! I once tried to play in this room as a child, but was stopped by my mother. Oho! I'm excited to see what's inside," said Matthias, flashing the children behind him a mischievous grin. Bel, who led the group, flashed him a smile of her own. They really were a like-minded pair of great-grandfather and great-grandchild.

The moment Bel entered the room, she squealed with glee. "Whoa, there's so much stuff in here!" Her adventuring heart had been set aflame, and her eyes sparkled. Likely inspired by Bel's reaction, Kiryl excitedly looked around the room as well.

Yanna, on the other hand, watched Kiryl with worry. She was likely concerned that Bel would have a negative influence on the boy; she really was a considerate older sister.

“There are so many books...” whispered Bel as she gazed at the shelves along the wall. They were filled with countless heavy-looking tomes, though glancing at the spine of any given one didn’t give her an idea as to what they were about.

“I wonder what kind of book this is.” Bel took one in her hand and flipped through it before immediately returning it to where it was. On principle, Bel didn’t hate books, but she did hate studying. She had absolutely no intention of reading any difficult books! None in the slightest! However...

“There might be something suspicious hidden within them! Let’s take a look. Pulling out the right one might reveal a hidden room!”

“Do noble manors usually have that sort of thing...?” sullenly muttered Yanna as she recalled the terrible things she had endured at the Schuberts’ residence.

Bel giggled. “I’m sure you’ll be shocked to know Saint-Noel Academy has them too!” she said, wearing the proud look of someone in the know.

Chapter 13: ...Huh?

"You're fine... Things will be fine..." Mia repeated those words over and over with Patty still in her arms. After a short while, she felt the younger girl begin to calm down. "You're fine... Things will be fine... Everything is...fine?"

Mia glanced over at Citrina and studied her, wanting to know if *she* was okay. *Hm, she doesn't seem to have changed. I suppose it's safe to assume that Patty's influence in the past hasn't affected her.*

The two locked eyes. While Citrina had been watching Patty with worry, she now sensed Mia's gaze. She looked back at Mia with a tilted head and confusion on her face, which inspired some worry in Mia. *Well, it's always quite difficult to figure out what's on Rina's mind. Maybe she* has *changed...*

Mia was still petting Patty's hair when she opened her mouth. "Um, Rina? This may seem like an odd question, but do you have the troya that Bel—"

"This?" Citrina quickly pulled out the foal good-luck charm from her collar; at some point, she had affixed a string and turned it into a necklace. She held it out carefully, and it was clear she greatly treasured the item. "I always have it on me. It's Rina's most precious treasure."

"I see... And what was inside the vial you had?"

"It's a medicine to induce calmness, a concoction made from boiling various medicinal herbs. It allows for deep sleep if you place it beside your pillow at night. What did you think it was?"

Her nonchalant response had Mia sighing in relief. "I was quite certain it was poison..."

Citrina looked hurt. "Even Rina wouldn't walk through the halls with poison in my hands, Miss Mia." For a moment, Mia was worried she had made a misstep—until Citrina finished that thought. "It's impossible to know who may be watching."

Moons, how odd! A single sentence dispelled my worries in an instant! Her eyes wide, Mia pondered the mysterious power of words. Anyways...

“Have you calmed down, Patty?”

She didn’t answer. However, she made no move to run either.

“Let’s head for my room. I have much to discuss with you.”

Thus, Mia took Patty by the hand and led her to her quarters. Gil was no longer present, and Anne had instead taken his place.

“Is everything all right, Your Highness? You appeared to be in quite the panic earlier,” asked Ludwig, his tone anxious.

Mia gave him a curt nod. “Yes, everything is fine. There’s no problem at all.” Then, she turned her attention to Patty. “But I believe the time has come for us to fill Patty in on her situation.”

Mia was a veteran aurelia, and she knew all about waves and tides. It kept her from being washed ashore...usually. While it may be tempting to compare the limp figure of a washed-up jellyfish to the limp figure of Mia in her bed, such a juxtaposition would be terribly rude. In any case, Mia’s veteran jellyfish senses were telling her that the tide had come, and the wave was here—it was time to reveal the truth.

“In that case, I shall take my leave.” Having read the air, Citrina bowed and went to exit the room.

“Yes... Wait, no.” Mia was ready to see her off, but then, she realized something. “I would like you to stay here. I believe this talk has some relation to you, and as someone who has escaped the Serpents, it would be reassuring to have you here.”

“Escaped...the Serpents? But she’s a Yellowmoon...” Patty couldn’t follow, but Mia gently patted her head.

“Yes. Rina has escaped the rule of the Serpents, and she’s someone who I know is incredibly trustworthy. By the way, Patty, is this the study of Marquess Clausius? Have you been inside before?”

“No... They said it was off-limits to kids...”

“I see.” Mia walked toward the wall, removed the portrait there, and took it over to Patty. “Do you recognize the man in this painting?”

Patty stared at it, her face frozen expressionless. But then, it melted into one of surprise. “He... He looks like Hannes, but...”

Patty was clearly full of questions, and Mia responded with a nod. “You may have already come to this conclusion. However”—she cleared her throat—“we’re in a time much, much later than the one you came from. This is the future, and the man in this painting is your little brother, though much more grown up than you know

him." Mia put her hand to her chest. "And I am your granddaughter, Mia Luna Tearmoon."

Mia's words left Patty's eyes the size of saucers and her mouth agape. "Huh?" Those words were practically lifeless. "Miss Mia, you're my...granddaughter? Huh?"

"And Bel is *my* granddaughter. So, she'd be your, um... Well, she's the granddaughter of your granddaughter, so one of your descendants."

"The granddaughter of my granddaughter? Um... Huh?" Her eyes were spinning around her sockets.

Incidentally, the revelation that Patty was Mia's Grandmother Patricia had shocked both Anne and Citrina as well. They may have easily accepted the truth about Bel, but the truth about Patricia had been harder to believe. For one, she was the previous empress; unlike the future Princess Miabel, they all knew of Empress Patricia, as she was a historical figure. It was only natural this truth would be harder to swallow.

After observing Anne's and Citrina's reactions, Mia returned her attention to Patty. "Let me ask you for your name, Patty. Who exactly are you?"

"Huh? I-I am Patricia. Patricia Clausius... The daughter of a mistress who has the blood of the Clausiuses running through her veins...and who was educated to be the wife of the next emperor once the Clausius family adopted me." She willingly offered up this information, speaking each word carefully as if to confirm them for herself.

"Hm..." After hearing all this, Mia glanced at Ludwig. He responded with a nod of understanding.

"Records do indeed state that Empress Patricia hailed from House Clausius. However, this is the first I have heard that she wasn't a legitimate child of the marquess."

Citrina responded, her shock still clear on her face. "It isn't common knowledge, but...this isn't news to Rina. My father told me so once before... Then, she really is..." She nodded, making it clear she finally had accepted Mia's words as truth. Had this truth been known by all, it would have been easy for Patty to lie. However, Patty's words were awfully convincing considering very few knew the truth. Not to mention, claiming to be a previous empress was far from normal—quite frankly, it was beyond absurd. Had Patty been trying to fool them, there would have been better lies to tell,

but despite this, she had still pronounced herself to be Patricia Clausius.

Anne, on the other hand, came to Patty's side with a look of worry. She must have been concerned that such a young girl had been flung into the future alone.

Mia cleared her throat and once again returned her gaze to Patty. "Well, then. Are you satisfied, Patty? I believe we've explained some of the many questions you've had."

Silently, Patty nodded. "This portrait really does look like Hannes. And Gerta too... She looked so old, but her smile was the same. And the manor is different. If this is a time that comes after the one I lived in, it all makes sense..."

Apparently, Patty had believed them. Having overcome the hardest hurdle, Mia breathed a sigh of relief, but she quickly gathered herself. *No. The real important part is what comes next.* Now that she knew this was the future, she would be able to exert a large influence over the past. They absolutely needed her on their side.

Well, so much was already true the moment she came here. If Ludwig was right about the reason Patty was thrust into this time, getting Patty on her side was absolutely essential.

I'm such a genius that I've deviated from the proper flow of history. It delivered Patty here to correct that, so I need her to become someone so amazing it could justify the existence of someone like me. And for that, I need to get her out of the Serpents' grasp...

Mia nodded. "First, let me say this." She paused and put on a serious expression. "Patty, I'm going to have you betray the Serpents."

It was necessary to get Patty on their side before they granted her any more wisdom from the future. From what Mia could tell, the Serpents hadn't completely gained control over her heart. It should be quite possible to get her on their side.

"There are no Serpents watching you here, and there is no one who will mistreat you. So, I want you to be honest with us. Why have you aligned with the Serpents?"

Patty was silent.

"I may not know the answer to that question, but I don't think you truly wish to help them. Is there some sort of reason?" Mia watched the girl carefully.

Suddenly, Patty spoke. "What about Hannes?"

"Huh?"

“What happened to Hannes?”

She was asking about her brother, Marquess Hannes Clausius. According to Gil, the Yellowmoons had assassinated him. However...

“Oh, um...” Mia glanced at Citrina.

“There is nothing Rina can say for sure without asking my father, but if the Yellowmoons were involved...he has probably been secretly brought abroad.”

“Abroad...” Patty was silent for a moment as she thought this over. “But what about his sickness?”

“His sickness? What do you mean?” asked Mia.

“He’s sick, and the only thing that can save him is a medicine the Serpents make... That’s why we can’t run away...”

This revelation had Mia gulping. “He’s ill?” asked Mia as she glanced over at her brains (that is, Ludwig).

“I have never heard that Marquess Clausius suffered from any illness. I shall confirm this with Gilbert.”

“I see...” Mia folded her arms as she mulled over his words. “Does that mean he’s been cured? Was it the sort of illness that can go away, Patty?”

“I don’t know,” she quickly spat out those words before biting her lip. “I don’t really know much about it...”

The girl looked incredibly pained, so Mia hurried to follow up those words. “There’s nothing to worry about, Patty. That’s only natural.”

While Patty may be her wise Grandma Patricia, asking a ten-year-old girl the particulars of her brother’s illness was harsh. Her knowledge was likely restricted to what she had heard from the Serpents, and naturally, they wouldn’t fill her in on what was most important.

As Mia thought this over, she folded her arms and tried to make herself look like she was someone who was really thinking deeply about the matter. “That means that Marquess Hannes...um...uh...”

Mia was at a loss, but suddenly, Anne jumped onto the scene! “Would you like me to bring some tea and snacks, milady?”

That was when Mia finally realized that her sugar reserves were completely depleted. Rubbing her stomach and painfully aware of her hunger, Mia flashed Anne a relaxed grin. “What an excellent idea, Anne. Sweets and tea are essential for being able to think well. Please bring them as soon as you can.”

On her orders, Anne quickly went off to prepare some tea.

After a short break, brewed black tea and two large cookies were brought before Mia. Part of her felt like two cookies were too few, but given it would soon be dinner, that was just the way things had to be.

"Oho ho! Tea and sweets truly are the best for thinking," exclaimed Mia with a joyful laugh. Patty sat across from her, and Citrina and Ludwig sat to both her sides. Anne alone stood next to Patty out of consideration for the young girl, ready to move into action on a moment's notice. She truly was a model maid.

Anne is always helping me, and I never help her. While relishing her appreciation for her maid, Mia had already brought one of the cookies to her mouth. She crunched down on it and, after a moment of chewing, washed it down with a sip of tea. *My, these cookies are quite delicious! They're not very sweet, but they have such a luxurious taste. I think it's time for another one!* Mia munched away at her second cookie and took another sip of tea. The taste was truly divine.

"If you would allow me, Your Highness, I would like to take a moment to get our situation straight," suggested Ludwig. Mia lifted her gaze to find him staring at her.

"Yes, that sounds perfect. Can you explain what it is we know and what we don't?"

"Then by your leave..." He pushed up his glasses. "First, during our break, I took the time to cross-reference our information with Gilbert. At the very least, mention of Marquess Hannes Clausius suffering from illness does not appear in any public records."

"I see. He must have made a full recovery, or perhaps..." Mia glanced at Patty. "Was his illness the type that could be suppressed with medicine? Would it mask any obvious symptoms?"

"With the medicine, he was just a tiny bit unwell. People would just think he was weak. But without the medicine, he'll get so sick it'll kill him..."

"He'd die without the medicine? Hm, that means..." Mia gulped down a sip of tea and reached her hand for the table...but all she grabbed was air. She shot open her eyes and examined the scene in front of her—the plate of cookies was empty! "How odd..."

Just when did I eat those cookies...? was what Mia was wondering, but Ludwig nodded as if he had been thinking the same

thing. “Yes, it is quite odd. If he was so ill he would perish without the remedy, there would be no reason to use the Yellowmoons to kill him. They could simply keep the medicine from him.”

Citrina now spoke. “There have been no assassinations in the Yellowmoon family ever since Rina’s father became the head. Instead, we helped those targets escape abroad in hopes they would one day be our allies should we cut ties with the Serpents. Thus, Rina doesn’t think we would send someone so sick to a far-off land without the proper preparations.”

“You’re right. Lord Lorenz isn’t the type to overlook those things. That means either he made a full recovery, or he found a way to obtain the medicine from someone other than the Serpents.” Mia turned her thoughts away from the cookies for a moment and put on an expression that said, “Yes, that’s exactly what *I* was thinking!” She truly lived up to her title as a veteran wave-rider. “In any case, we won’t be able to say anything for sure unless we can meet my great…uncle? Hannes.”

The door suddenly burst open. “Miss Mia!” cried out an invigorated voice. It was none other than the Bel Adventuring Squad!

“Bel, that’s no way for a princess to act. You need to have a bit more modesty and—”

“We found something interesting! Will you take a look?” Bel deftly averted Mia’s admonishing and held out a…

Chapter 14: Bel Makes a Discovery!

Let us once again rewind the clock. While Mia and Patty were locked into a serious discussion, the Bel Adventuring Squad was putting up a fierce (fierce, really?) fight in the private quarters of the former Lord Hannes Clausius. Bel's observant eye immediately honed in on the large hoard of books in the room, leading her to take one off the shelf after another. She flipped through each and every one.

"Hm..." She softly closed a book and returned it to the shelf, which could only be expected of her. While about half of these books were written in the imperial language, they were all difficult enough to inspire headaches after just a single page, and an additional forty percent were so difficult Bel couldn't even tell what they were trying to say at all *despite* being written in the imperial language. The final ten percent of books were written in a foreign tongue. Quite frankly, there were incredibly few books Bel could read.

"There don't seem to be any secret passageways that taking any of these books off the shelves would reveal. What a shame..." Bel had already abandoned all hopes of making any discoveries based on the books' contents, so all her attention had shifted to finding mechanisms or tricks. Captain Bel was a young woman of stellar judgment, able to shift courses in an instant.

"Bel? What about this book?" Kiryl timidly approached, a single volume in hand.

"Why, that's..." The cover had a cute picture of a fish. Bel took it into her own hands and gave it a stare. "This must be a children's book. It's thin and has a lot of illustrations! I don't think I—I mean, you or Yanna—would have any trouble reading this one!"

Just to be absolutely clear, Bel didn't have any particular antipathy when it came to books and could read them just fine. She simply wasn't too good with difficult reads, and the ones that weren't too entertaining never stuck in her mind.

In any case, when Bel flipped through the picture book, a single

sheet fell out. “Huh? What’s this?”

It glided back and forth in the air before finally reaching the floor. For a moment, Bel thought that a page had simply fallen out, but when she took the paper into her hands, there was nothing written on it. Instead, it was oddly covered with small holes.

“Hm... Did a bug eat through it?” asked Matthias, peering over Bel’s shoulder with a hand to his chin.

“No, I don’t think so.” Bel looked at the holes with narrowed eyes, then lined the paper up with the book. “It seems like there’s an order to where these holes have been made. See? The hole closest to the left is the exact same height as the fourth one, and the second and seventh match too!” Bel groaned as she studied the paper. “Did someone open these by hand? But why?”

“Isn’t it just some sort of prank?” asked Yanna suspiciously, but Bel was confident in her conclusions and shook her head.

“I don’t think so. Probably, at least. They’re too neat. See? They line up exactly.” Bel scowled and poked a finger to her temple. “It seems like if there were words on this page, lining up all the letters that showed through the holes would reveal a message...or maybe you need to line it up with a book page!”

There was a bit of sense to Bel’s words, but of course, that hadn’t come from her *own* senses. This was the wisdom she had learned from a book she had read herself, *The Poor Prince and the Golden Dragon: Twelve Dialogues from the Sage of the Meadow* by Elise Littstein. In the novel, the prince who served as the main character solved riddles offered to him by an old man known by all as The Sage of the Meadow. One section of the story featured the code words, “The Sage’s Thesis,” and another featured the sage disappearing into a hidden room using a hidden trap. Elise wasn’t a one-trick pony; she could write fantasy, romance, *and* mysteries! As such, Elise trying her hand at science fiction in order to solve the mystery of Mia and the others’ time travel was a real concern.

“Hm, but that doesn’t seem quite right either. There definitely seems to be some secret behind this... I feel like it’s a treasure map! And in that case... Oh! I wonder if something would appear if we ignored the holes and just lit it on fire!”

“U-Um, don’t you think it’s best we bring this to Miss Mia...?” Just as Bel was muttering out a disastrous plan, Yanna—the most sensible person in the room—stepped in to stop her. It didn’t bode well for the Bel Adventuring Squad if someone as young as Yanna

was their “most sensible member”; the lack of Anne and Citrina in their mix was truly a shame. “If you light it on fire, it might burn up. Then we might not be able to solve anything. So, um, I think we should bring it to Miss Mia.” Yanna made a desperate attempt to convince Bel to change her mind.

“You’re right. I’m sure Miss Mia could solve this in an instant! Let’s do that!” Bel readily accepted her idea with a clap of her hands. At her core, Bel lacked the mettle to try to solve any riddles herself. She was more the type to read her novels without even attempting to solve the mystery and instead arrive at the answer with genuine surprise.

“Then let’s get going!” Bel’s Adventuring Squad took (what Bel assumed to be) the treasure map into their hands and headed off to see Mia.

Chapter 15: Mia Overlaps

“Huh. There are holes in this paper...” Mia gave the page Bel had handed her a curious look and softly traced the holes with her finger. “Did a bug eat it?”

“Oho! So you agree! That’s exactly what I thought!” exclaimed Matthias with a cheerful grin. Startled by this, Mia glanced over at Bel.

“Yup! That’s exactly what papa said!” she responded with a grin and a nod. “You really are father and daughter!”

Matthias chuckled loudly. “Right?! Mia truly is my darling daughter! Aha ha ha!” Given his laugh, that comment must have made him incredibly happy.

Mia just thought he was obnoxious, but of course, she kept such comments to herself. That didn’t stop her cheek from twitching, however. “N-No. Now that I’ve looked a bit more carefully, the holes appear to be lined up. A bug couldn’t have done this. I’m embarrassed to have made such a foolish mistake.”

Mia once again looked at the paper and began to think. She was taking this incredibly seriously.

"Perhaps this would reveal letters if we lit it on fire."

"You agree! That was my idea!" Now, it was Bel who was all grins. "You're so smart Gran—Miss Mia! Tee hee! I'm so glad we had the same thought!"

Bel's carefree smile had Mia...scowling. *Serious thinking led me to the same conclusion as* Bel*? Just how should I interpret this?*

Suddenly, Citrina reached her hand forward. "My apologies, Miss Mia." She took the paper into her hand and brought it to her nose, closing her eyes and twitching her small nose as she sniffed it. "The chemical typically used for this type of invisible ink has a unique smell, but I don't smell it here." She returned the paper to Mia. "They may have used an odorless chemical, or perhaps enough time has passed to dissipate the scent. But as of now, it would be quite risky to light this on fire."

"I see. In that case..." Mia once again stared at the paper. Then, she clapped her hands in a flash of inspiration. "Oh! That's right! Why don't we ask Patty?" She used to live in this manor, after all, and it was likely her younger brother who had left this paper behind. For a moment, Mia worried that doing so would reveal Patty's true identity to her father, but...when she glanced at him, she saw he still had the same silly grin on his face. *If that's the mood he's in, it should be fine.*

It should be impossible for him to imagine that his mother's young self had leaped through time anyway. Thus, Mia turned her attention to Patty. Sensing her gaze, the girl blinked before timidly taking the paper in her hands.

"What do you think, Patty? Do you have any idea what this could be?" As those words left her mouth, different thoughts were going through Mia's head. *Thinking about it again, aren't we being a bit too hasty to assume that this piece of paper would serve as any big clue? Even if these holes were opened by hand, there's no guarantee it's a code related to Marquess Hannes. It's possible this is just some childish prank.*

"This is..." Patty's eyes were locked on the paper. She softly traced the front of the page with one of her delicate fingers. Then suddenly, she seemed to realize what it was. "It's music..."

"Huh?"

Patty glanced at Mia before returning her attention to the

paper. “It’s music that someone wrote down. If we had the instrument at Marquess Schubert’s house, I think we could play it.”

“Huh. Music…”

Mia could only groan, but behind her, Ludwig clapped his hands. “Ah, indeed. I’ve heard of this before. Roughly ten years ago, the church attempted to develop a code to record music so that the masses could sing the traditional sacred hymns. I believe they took the name of its inventor and dubbed it the ‘Yorgos Scale.’”

According to the Holy Book, music was a method of expressing happiness bestowed to humans by the Holy Deity. To sing their god’s praises and celebrate his work in sowing seeds and harvesting crops, people created songs. However, it was only recently that these songs truly spread to the masses. Until the priest Yorgos created what was commonly known as “Yorgos Score,” there had been no way of recording music, making it something spread only by expert musicians to their apprentices or through oral tradition. People were only able to enjoy music in the true sense after Yorgos —a priest who had been sent to the small nations in the west— developed his twelve-note scale. However…

“Huh? That can’t be true. Hannes and I invented this…” Patty’s eyes were wide. “We’d play together using that instrument. We’re the only ones who know how to read it…”

Hearing this, Ludwig—who currently had the paper in his hands—adjusted his glasses. “If that is true, then perhaps the priest and Marquess Hannes are somehow connected.”

“That makes sense. Then the priest used what Great-Uncle Hannes told him to make his scale…” Mia brought a hand to her chin and began to ponder.

“Priest Yorgos? Isn’t that…?” A voice rang out from next to Mia. Yanna locked eyes with Kiryl.

“From back then…?”

“What is it, you two?”

Yanna gathered herself with a nod. “Miss Mia, I’m certain the name of the priest who took care of us and sent us to Saint-Noel Academy was…Yorgos.”

“My! What an odd coincidence. I suppose that means it’s possible that Great-Uncle Hannes was brought to Ganudos Port Country.” Mia folded her arms and groaned.

“Though it is possible they simply share a name. I believe it would be best that we ask for confirmation from Miss Rafina of

Belluga."

Mia nodded at Ludwig, her arms still folded. "Yes, we'll need to contact Miss Rafina…and Duke Lorenz as well. It must have been the Yellowmoons who brought Great-Uncle Hannes abroad, so we'll need to ask him for confirmation as to where to go."

Mia glanced at Citrina, who nodded. "Rina will ask my father immediately."

"Please do. In any case, it seems we'll need to visit the Schuberts before we can head to Ganudos."

Chapter 16: The Sword He Seeks

While the brains of the bunch led by Mia were working hard (well, except for a few of them), those in charge of securing the manor were doing the same.

"Make sure the perimeter is well protected so that we can respond to anything." Leading this effort was the first member of the Princess Guard, the loyal soldier Ogen. He barked his orders with Abel and Dion standing at his side.

"We need to keep our enemies from trespassing, but first we must consider escape routes in case we need to leave the manor," said Abel with a hand to his chin. With enough soldiers, fending off an enemy invasion was simple; the bigger danger would be if their enemies lit fire to the manor, smoking them out to launch a counterattack. Making it through a castle's walls and defeating them from the outside was a tall order, but sneaking inside or forcing your enemies out was much easier.

"Yes, you're right. We should figure out a few paths to escape." Ogen nodded at Abel and immediately ordered his men to do so.

"Is there anything in particular you've noticed, Sir Ogen?"

"Hm... Well, we're not familiar with the land, so it's best we stay diligent. The way I see it, I think there's a real possibility our enemies may sneak inside."

"Then you believe there's a secret passageway similar to the one at the Schuberts' residence?" asked Abel, his brow furrowed.

"That's one possibility, but they might come at us head-on too." Dion silently turned to Ogen. "If they're gonna launch an attack on us here, they'd have to be skilled men. If they were to send an assassin as skilled as the wolfmaster after us, well... You guys are the best of the best, but he'd be able to take you two-against-one before you even had a chance to scream."

"I see... Then let's move in squadrons of three. That should give our soldiers time to scream and alert the others." Ogen didn't seem particularly offended by Dion's words. Instead, he spoke those words as if his thinking were only the most natural conclusion.

“Yup. If possible, I’d add one more to those squads so that they’d overwhelm the enemy and stave off any fighting. I’d rather keep our men’s casualties to a minimum, and I’m sure that’s what our little princess wants too.” Dion glanced at Abel and spoke with a slightly teasing tone. “Speaking of what the little princess wants, should you be here, Prince Abel?”

“They have Mia, Sir Ludwig, and the younger students from the academy. I’m sure I wouldn’t be much help to them.” Ludwig was one thing, but it was quite the lethal mistake in calculations to consider Mia a useful member of their forces. “Plus, I was hoping you would train me, Sir Dion.”

“Train you? Huh.” Dion watched Abel with lowered eyes. “I don’t mind, but…if I’m going to train you, you better set a goal.”

“A goal? What do you mean?” asked Abel.

Dion fixed his posture. “Prince Abel Remno, what do you seek from your sword?”

“What do I…seek?” Abel had clearly been caught off guard by the question.

Dion continued. “You’re strong. Strong enough to do what you need on the battlefield as a member of the monarchy. But if even greater strength is what you’re after, you can’t just be chasing such a vague idea. You’ve gotta have a clear vision.” Dion crossed his arms. “Grammateus, Remno’s Sword Saint, must have taught you well. He’s an expert in the swordsmanship skills that a king would need. I’m sure he knows exactly what it would mean for his king to perish on the battlefield.”

The face of the old sword master appeared in Abel’s mind. He always stressed the importance of not just having the skills, but doing whatever it takes to win, survive, and stand on the battlefield until the very end.

“Then what about your friend Prince Sion? He’s a prodigy with a sword, but the swordsmanship of Sunkland is all about carrying out justice and fighting fairly. I’m sure he’ll become a swordsman that matches that.”

Sion fought fairly, parrying his opponent from head-on and crushing them with a single strike. His sword was that of justice and lacked even the slightest hint of cowardice.

“And not to sound too cocky, but my sword—the sword of Dion Alaia—is one that can cut down a hundred—no, two hundred men on the battlefield. My sword seeks to stop my opponents in their

tracks via overwhelming power and fear. Well, I guess that's not something one can really say about himself." He shrugged. "In reality, I don't think that sword suits Her Highness. I'm in the midst of finding a new type of swordsmanship, but anyway..." His silent, sharp eyes pierced through Abel. "What sword do you seek, Prince Abel? I'm not so sure I should be asking this to a foreign prince, but you're the man in our princess's heart, and it seems like you've decided to spend your future at her side. With that in mind, I can't afford not to ask."

"I see. I've never considered it before..." Abel was silent as he looked at his feet. However, it only took him a moment to find his answer—rather, it was something he had always known. "The sword I seek is one that supports and protects Mia." He raised his gaze and looked straight at Dion. "I will become her shield and support her whenever she seems on the verge of collapse. That is the swordsmanship I will practice."

"Huh..." Interest filled Dion's eyes. Then, he put on a mischievous smirk. "Her shield, huh? Why don't you try fighting with one?"

"With a shield?" Dion's unexpected suggestion had Abel blankly blinking at him.

"From what I can tell, your sword is one meant to attack. You use a strong swing from above to knock your enemies off-balance and guarantee yourself the upper hand for the whole battle. It makes you strong, but it's not suited for defending anyone standing behind you."

"I see. So the shield would make up for that..."

"You don't think it suits a member of the monarchy?"

"It's not that. I've just never considered it before." As Abel lost himself in his thoughts, Dion watched over him with a rare kind grin.

Chapter 17: Midnight Royal Girls' Talk

The group decided to put off returning to the Schuberts' manor for two days, and thus...they spent the night at the Clausius manor —the *cursed* Clausius manor—just as they had planned. Which meant...

"Well, if Great-Uncle Hannes is alive, the curse must be fiction. Yup! It has to be!" muttered Mia as she lay atop her bed. She was certain that Anne would be with her, but since Mia's father was present, Mia couldn't act as selfishly as usual. Masters and their servants didn't typically share a room; rather, it was natural for a high-and-mighty princess like Mia to have a large room to herself, which meant Mia was currently alone.

"It's fine... I'll be fine... I'll be...fine?" A clashing sound suddenly reverberated through the room, causing Mia to jump into the air. Then, she buried herself under the covers and shut her eyes.

"One sarpir sheep, two sarpir sheep... I'd love some of their tasty milk..." As Mia began to count sheep, she was unable to keep some unrelated thoughts out of her mind. Yet sleep wasn't coming to her, and once she began to think about how much she wanted some hot milk, all her sleepiness had vanished. "I shouldn't have been counting sheep! Horses would've been better! One Kuolan, two Dongfengs... It's been a while since I've had any horse-shaped bread..."

She must have not gotten enough to eat at dinner. But suddenly, that crash resounded again...and it was coming from right next to her! In fact, right *underneath her bed*!

Mia once again shot into the air. Then, timidly, she peeked under her bed and found...a monster with long hair!

"Eeeeeeeek! A-Anne! Aaaaanne!!!" Her voice was hoarse as she screamed.

The long-haired monster looked at her. "Oh, Miss Mia! I'm glad I made it!" It was grinning.

“Huh...? O-Oh, Bel...”

Yes, the “monster” was none other than Bel. But she wasn’t alone, as Patty crawled out from behind her.

“What are you two doing here? And why were you under the bed?”

Bel giggled. “Patty’s amazing! She knows all about the secret passages here!” Bel looked at Patty and laughed.

“I see, so there’s hidden passages... Though, I seem to recall something similar happening to me before...”

Didn’t Mia think Bel was a ghost the first time she saw her? Suddenly, Mia began to feel nostalgic. Had two years really passed since then?

“Wait, you weren’t thinking of going on an adventure, were you?”

“Huh? It’s a secret passageway. What other reason would I need to enter?” Bel clearly couldn’t quite wrap her mind around Mia’s question. Mia, on the other hand, couldn’t help but hold her head in her hands out of sheer exasperation.

Bel once again laughed. “Just kidding! Patty said she had some business with you, so I brought her here!”

“My, Patty did?” Mia tilted her head and watched Patty, who nodded.

“Um, there’s something I want to ask you...” Timidly, Patty began to speak. “Are you really...my granddaughter?”

“Yup, I already told you, didn’t I? I really am.”

“Then, um... Is papa—I mean, His Majesty—my...child?” She looked slightly pale.

“Well, I suppose so. Given how he acts, you might not want that to be true, but... Oh! He is a good person. He’s kind, and he’s not *too* bad. So don’t let that get you down.” Mia tried to defend her father, but Patty still fell to her knees. She held her head in her hands as if trying to protect it.

“There’s no way... Why?” she muttered.

“Wh-What’s wrong, Patty?” Her sudden reaction incited some panic in Mia.

Patty groaned. “Matthias...was my dog’s name!”

“*Huh?*”

“Matthias was the name of the dog I had a long time ago! Why would I name him that...?” Patty was completely defeated. On the other hand...

“Father has the same name as your…*dog*?” Mia imagined her father demanding that he call her papa as he ran around. There really was something quite doglike about him.

Mia and Bel locked eyes. Then, they burst into laughter. For a while, Patty’s face was still locked in a scowl, but eventually, Bel and Mia had her giggling too.

The time they spent together that day was incredibly, incredibly wonderful.

“Oh! Given that you two are here, why don’t we invite Anne in for some girls’ talk? We can call Yanna in too, but Kiryl will have to sit this one out.” Suddenly, Mia was silent. “No, why don’t we take this chance to spend some time with just the three of us? We should make a habit of it!”

Mia had never spoken to her grandmother, as she had already passed by the time Mia was old enough to remember her. Of course, Bel would have never had the chance to speak to Patty otherwise either. The three of them getting the chance to talk together was nothing short of a miracle.

“There’s no telling when you two will return to your old worlds, but let’s talk all we can until that happens.” At Mia’s suggestion, the group of granddaughters and grandmothers grinned at each other.

Chapter 18: A Nighttime Encounter

Darkness had long been associated with evil. It traced back to basic times, and just like the idiom "to shine light on" suggested, the sun was the light that mercilessly bathed all malice in a warm glow. The questionable and those who had things they wished to hide inevitably loved the sun's absence and yearned for new moon nights that lacked even a lunar glow.

In such a night covered by the veil of darkness, two men walked through the domain capital of Clauvert.

"Damn, the Great Sage of the Empire acts quick," said the Serpent shaman Ka Kunlou as he lazily walked the backstreets of the city. "I didn't think she'd be coming here until a bit later down the road." *Not like that would change much,* he thought with a sardonic grin. *Without time to prepare, there's not much we can do. This puts us in quite a pickle.*

Kunlou's thinking was rooted in the basic nature of the Serpents—the inclination to give a gentle nudge to any who looked like they were about to tumble off a cliff, or the habit of melting into the background until you found a place that was about to crack and applying just the force it needed to do so. Unnoticed, they destroyed relationships and brought the world ever slightly down a darker road. Small acts of evil—one for each day—was essential to their goals. Once that malice piled up, the flow of history became ever so slightly diverted toward chaos.

"Yet, the Great Sage wouldn't just save everyone from falling off that cliff, she'd keep anyone from even approaching. What trouble..." Kunlou's strategy was rooted in keeping out of his enemies' sights at all costs. He wasn't good at making any direct attacks; not only did they take time, but his enemies discovering his identity made everything ten times harder.

"Wouldn't getting rid of her vanguard forces have helped us?" responded the man beside him. He was the bandana-wearing Serpent assassin. Unlike Kunlou, he was a man who had the power to do evil through direct violence...but in Kunlou's eyes, he didn't

have brains to match his strength.

He's fun to talk to, but...

The man with the bandana was ignorant of Kunlou's true thoughts as he continued speaking. "Weren't they strutting around the town? If we just killed them, then—"

"Obviously, that's a trap. That intel spread to us too easily."

Gerta had warned them that the Great Sage was currently looking into the deceased Marquess Clausius and his family. Upon hearing that, Kunlou had come to confirm things for himself on a whim, but as soon as they arrived here, they immediately received word that a group of men researching House Clausius had been making the rounds.

"There's no way men working under the Great Sage would be collecting intel in a way that draws so much attention. It's gotta be a trap. Who knows what would happen to us if we bite?"

"We'd just have to swallow the trap whole. But yes, you're right. I'm sure the people in power think those on the lowest rung of men working for them are more worthless than a single gold coin. There's no need for us to be a part of those calculations, I suppose."

Kunlou had long made this realization, but his Visalian companion seemed to be awfully inimical to those in charge. For a moment, he wondered about his past. Then, his companion once again interrupted him.

"Still, we just need to target the Great Sage."

Well, that made it sound a lot easier than it was.

"You want us to launch a surprise attack on the Clausius manor? You're brave. If we had a brigade of knights at our disposal, maybe we could actually try it."

"There's no need to attack such a well-protected manor. We only need to set fire to it. If we attack right as they exit the building, we'll be able to catch them off guard."

Well, that was certainly better than assaulting the place without a plan, but...

"Do you really think it's possible to outwit Mia Luna Tearmoon, given her smarts?"

An unexpected attack could certainly catch *her* off guard, but if she had already predicted they would attempt to make a move, this "surprise attack" wouldn't be much of a surprise.

"Don't underestimate her. She's even smarter than our High

Priestess, she's saved Tearmoon, Remno, *and* Sunkland from harm, and she's even solved the issues within the Equestrian Kingdom. The plot of the first emperor has lasted for centuries, but before her, it's just a candle in the wind..." Saying it all aloud again...she really *did* sound amazing! He had a bit of a hard time thinking a mere human could really accomplish all that. "You really want to test your wits against hers? Stupidity has a limit, y'know."

"You seem much more foolish than I from my shoes," he said with a scowl. "But what's the point of rubbing that bag against the wall?"

"You don't get it? It reeks."

The man with a bandana chuckled. "I see. We are travelers, after all. Since we haven't had the chance to bathe, we must smell. Is rubbing such a smelly item on the wall a plot to spread evil through the world?"

"You really let your malice shine through... I could fall for you," said Kunlou with a sneer. "Unfortunately, I'm not targeting people right now, but rather animals with a better sense of smell... Huh?"

Suddenly, a shadow stood before them. "I have found you. So you truly were here, Kunlou." It was the younger sister of the Chief of the Fire Clan, Ka Aima, and her sidekick Hasuki.

"Well, looky here. If it isn't Aima." Seeing that he had successfully drawn the moth to the flame, Kunlou couldn't help but snicker inside. He spoke to them like an old friend. "I never thought I'd see you here! Aha ha! So you've become a mutt of the Great Sage, just like your brother."

He egged her on, and Aima's scowl made him believe she had taken the bait. "How rude. I am not a mutt, but a wolf! An incredibly well-domesticated one! Do not mistake me. Right, Hasuki?" Aima patted her wolf's head who responded with a bark.

So she was fine with this as long as she was called a wolf? And wait, weren't domesticated wolves just dogs? These incredibly apt rebuttals made their way to Kunlou's head, but he swallowed the sardonic grin that threatened to make its way to his face.

"Well, I see... So? What is this little wolf doing here?"

"You already know the answer to that. I am a warrior, and I have come to protect my friend Mia and take revenge for my brother. I was lucky to find you."

It was the man with the bandana who reacted to these words. He looked at her with eyes full of interest. "Aha! How interesting.

Revenge for your brother? Do you plan to use that wolf to battle me, or do you plan to draw a sword yourself, young warrior?" The man put on a derisive grin as he drew his blade. "Well, not that I mind either way."

"Oh, but don't kill her, okay? We need to take her hostage," added a panicked Kunlou.

Yes, Aima was his target. His goal was to recreate the last circumstances that had cornered Mia Luna Tearmoon—taking a loved one captive to draw her out. It was a plan that took advantage of her one weakness.

Aima dismissed him with a nasal laugh. "I have no need to fight myself. Come forth, Dion Alaia, the Empire's Finest!" she declared with a puffed-out chest. Loud and clear, her voice reverberated in the night.

"Huh?" All was silent. She tilted her head. "How odd. I was told this would summon him."

"Dang. Don't go walking around and summoning me like that." A man suddenly appeared in the night. Countless experiences on the battlefield had toned his body. He wore two swords on his hips and had a cool smile on his face. He was...

"O-Oh, you really came, Dion Alaia. The Yellowmoon girl was right." Aima was clearly impressed.

That's right, Aima had listened to Mia's advice and had gone to ask Citrina for hers. And what did she ask her? How to make Dion Alaia not so scary.

Citrina had pondered that question for a moment. "The best thing to do is not to draw any weapons against him. As long as you follow that rule, he won't kill you, and I think he'll even show up to save you if you need it. That man will appear from anywhere..."

Aima didn't quite fully believe her words, but just as Citrina had predicted, Dion had appeared.

"She truly is an expert on Dion Alaia. I see why Princess Mia recommended her. From today onwards, I shall look up to her as a mentor!" While she was a tad shocked, she also felt the joy of taming a ferocious wolf.

Dion glanced at her and chuckled. "I can't say I'm too happy about being used as it suits you, but..."

The sharp clatter of his swords caused Aima to jump into the air. She put some distance between them as she spoke. "N-No, well... I-I am not pushing you around, Dion Alaia! I just discovered some enemies of Princess Mia's. Fighting them is the job of her sword, so I summoned you. I would never dream of—" She was speaking awfully quickly.

Dion shook his head, exasperated. "Well, whatever. Since you're a friend of our little princess, I'll look the other way this time, but..." Dion returned his gaze to Kunlou. "Kidnapping again? I see you're a one-trick pony." He drew his sword and placed it on his shoulder. "I gotta admit I'm a bit tired of this."

"If it's effective, why not use it again? I thought that was obvious," said Kunlou as he stepped backward. His body language made it clear that he wanted to run, but the man next to him brandished his sword. As soon as Aima had recalled Citrina's advice that the best thing to do is not to draw any weapons against him, Dion began to speak.

"That's right. You got one over on me last time, didn't you?" With that, he disappeared.

Aima's eyes were wide open in shock, and she watched as the clouds that covered the sky parted, letting rays from the moon shine onto the earth. In their faint glow, the figure of Dion bringing his blade down on Kunlou appeared. Seeing his superhuman speed, she

couldn't help but recoil from him and mutter, "H-How scary... Dion Alaia is so scary!"

Kunlou, on the other hand, didn't have the time to recoil. "Eeeeeeek!"

At the sight of Dion Alaia suddenly appearing before him and swinging a sword down at his head, all Kunlou could do was fall to his knees. All strength had left his legs...or really, he was just trying to make it look as if it had. Dion's sword came crashing down, but someone stepped in his way to protect Kunlou.

"You've got skill, but I'm not dumb enough to bite."

Kunlou's companion gleefully blocked Dion's slash. He held a curved blade in his hand, the type of sword preferred by the pirates that operated off of Ganudos Port Country. Having blocked Dion's attack, the man gave a haughty chuckle. But in the next moment, he had been blown to the side. Dion had spun his body backward and kicked him.

He's not just some well-mannered knight; he's seen plenty of battles. Kunlou calmly analyzed the situation while pretending he was too frightened to stand. Thanks to that, all of Dion's attention was focused on the assassin.

"So you're the one who bested the wolfmaster." Dion placed his sword on his shoulder and slowly stepped toward the man with the bandana. "You're not half bad, but I can tell you're still green around the ears. Prince Abel has much more resolve than you do."

"You believe my sword pales in comparison to that of a half-hearted prince?"

"That's a relief. If you failed to understand that much, your brains would have paled in comparison to his too."

"You're dead!"

The furious assassin once again attacked. *A fair fight ain't gonna work for us. We messed up. Who would've thought Dion Alaia was so capable?* Kunlou regretted his miscalculations. Even if the Great Sage of the Empire had come to the same town as them, they shouldn't have interfered. This wasn't his style. *I guess all these recent failures got to me. It's what I deserve for trying to do what I'm not good at.*

Gaping like a fish, Kunlou tried to retreat. As he moved himself farther and farther from Dion, he looked around and...Ka Aima was standing right where he was headed. It was only now that he

realized he needed to check whether Aima was watching him or not.

Ka Kunlou was a clever man who was skilled at making himself look insignificant in the eyes of others. Well, when it came to battles, he really *was* insignificant, which was why pretending hadn't been too difficult for him. As a result, he had escaped Dion's notice...and had succeeded in escaping Aima's as well.

Outside of their notice and concealed by shadow, Kunlou confirmed his current situation. They had little time left, even if the man with the bandana facing off against Dion was what allowed Kunlou to escape all notice. *It's only a matter of time until he's done for. I guess that means it's my time to shine.*

But what could he do? Kunlou found a lifeline in these perilous circumstances in Aima. She had once formed a group of bandits from her chief's warriors and led them in battle. She had been trained by her brother and was quite skilled with a sword—certainly more than Kunlou. Thus, he realized her confidence had likely left her negligent, and...he was right! Her eyes were trained on Dion Alaia.

"Go, Dion Alaia! Take revenge for my brother!" She was frankly *too* confident!

Well, let's do it. Kunlou twisted the hilt of his sword. Water came out, and once he had mixed it with the powder in his hands...

"Take this!"

A bright flash of light filled the night air.

"Huh?!" Aima let out a cry of surprise and froze. Her wolf whined next to her, and making sure to stay out of his sight, Kunlou moved as fluid as water and came to stand at her back. He put his arm around her frame and brought a cloth up to her mouth and nose.

"Bwah! Kfh... Khunrou..."

After a moment of struggle, Aima's body fell limp. Her knees folded beneath her, but Kunlou held her up. The warrior wolf had begun to recover from the earlier confusion, so Kunlou looked at him and said, "If you approach, your master dies," to keep him at bay. The wolf was trained, and upon hearing those words, he froze.

All according to plan. Now...

With Aima's collapsed form in his arms, Kunlou raised his voice. "You two got a second?"

Dion put distance between himself and the man with the

bandana. His opponent didn't take the opportunity to attack; clearly, he was too worn out to do so.

I guess I've gotta be glad he wasn't killed. He's skilled, but it's clear how continuing this fight will leave him. Jeez...

Kunlou sighed and looked at Dion. "Let's get things straight."

"You're not really trying to threaten me into throwing aside my blade by taking her as a hostage, are you?" said Dion as he redirected his sword at Kunlou.

Kunlou shrugged. "Of course not. You'd kill us as soon as those words left my mouth."

It would be one thing if he had taken the Great Sage, but Kunlou knew well that Aima was too insignificant to mean anything. Dion would never choose to offer his own life to save her. That offer wouldn't work out for Kunlou.

"Aima's already been poisoned. Ultimately, it'll kill her, but if you bring her to the Yellowmoon girl now, there's a chance that she'll be able to give her the antidote." Kunlou's compromise was simple: he offered Aima's life in exchange for Dion giving him and his companion time to escape.

The Great Sage of the Empire is weak against kidnappings. She must have influenced her sword to some degree. Which means...

"I see. Poison that won't kill her immediately but eventually will... Not to mention that Miss Yellowmoon will be able to heal her easily. I wonder...does such a convenient poison really exist?" Dion wore a deprecating grin.

"Who knows? What do *you* think?" Kunlou worked to make his grin seem as meaningful as possible. *He is right, though!*

In all honesty, Kunlou was making a desperate gambit. The poisons he had on hand that could kill all acted immediately. It was a baseless lie, and obviously, the Clausius manor wouldn't be filled with poisons and antidotes like the manor of the Yellowmoons.

Even if I had *used a poison that would kill her, Dion Alaia would just kill me.*

If Dion realized Aima was dead the moment she was back in his hands, he would just cut the two of them down. Kunlou needed to keep Aima alive, so the poison he had drugged her with was a soporific, the same one he had once used to knock out Citrina.

"By the way, I'm sure you'll be able to reverse it, but you'd better hurry up. Poison's poison, after all. There might be some aftereffects."

He was bluffing, of course. The only aftereffects she might have would be comparable to a hangover. However, Kunlou had been trained by the Serpents; he didn't let it show on his face. After saying all that, Kunlou stepped away from Aima. If she was still in his arms, he'd be defenseless if Dion decided to make a move as he took her from him. In order for his threat to work, Kunlou needed to make sure that Dion killing him and his companion would take enough time to threaten the girl.

"Uh-huh. I'm pretty sure you're lying, but there's no way to confirm it. Plus, I'd be equally suspicious if you claimed your earlier claim was a lie." Dion readily walked away from the man with the bandana and picked up Aima with a bitter laugh. "Seems like I let my guard down. I see I'm not good with deals that threaten lives that aren't my own." Dion cursed under his breath and left.

Once Kunlou had confirmed his figure had disappeared into the knight, he let out a sigh of relief and fell to the ground. "Damn, I guess I don't have the time to be relieved. We gotta get out of here." With an exasperated shake of his head, he walked over to where the man with the bandana lay collapsed on the ground. "You all right?"

"What is that man? Is he a beast?"

"I'm pretty sure I warned you that he isn't someone you want to mess with." Kunlou sighed in exasperation. "Well, it's good that trying to fight him yourself made you realize that. You did well to survive. For now, we've gotta hurry up and leave."

"I concur. But leave for where?" The man stood up.

Kunlou looked at him and grinned. "For now, we better stay away from the Great Sage. Why don't we leave Tearmoon and head to where you call home?"

"To Ganudos?"

"Yup. Let's slowly but surely spread our poison there. For me, that's more like it."

Incidentally, Aima woke up on Dion's back once they had returned to the manor of the Clausiuses. Having realized she was in the arms of the scary and terrifying Dion Alaia...she noted that her own negligence had allowed Kunlou and his companion the chance to escape. Just as she was imagining what terrible things lay in store for her in the wake of Dion's ire, she fell back asleep with a groan.

Chapter 19: Princess Mia Grows a Tad Presumptuous

Well then...

After staying up late (at least, late for Mia), Mia awoke the following day bathed in the soft morning light. Her vision was still blurry, but she caught sight of the peaceful sleeping figures of Bel and Patty.

My, just how did this happen?

For a moment, Mia pondered her current predicament. It was only then that she remembered the events of last night. She looked at Patty's face. Up until now, Patty's expressions had been stiff, and it was hard to know what lay in her heart. But now, Mia felt they had grown a tad closer.

"Seeing her asleep like this, she really does look like a cute little kid," remarked Mia with a giggle as she kindly put her hand on Patty's head. "I hope she's dreaming good dreams." The grin she wore somewhat seemed to reflect her age—that is, it had the kind understanding of a woman in her twenties. It was an incredibly rare expression coming from Mia.

In any case, the scene Mia awoke to was an incredibly pleasant one, but suddenly, there was a knock at her door. It opened to reveal Anne.

"Excuse me, milady. Sir Ludwig and Sir Dion wish to speak with you."

"My, both of them? It's rare for them to visit so early in the morning. It must be something important," said Mia with a curious look as she promptly got out of bed. "I'll go ahead and change. Will you lend me a hand, Anne?"

Mia's nose was picking up the faint scent of danger. *Dion's presence always reeks of danger. I'd better hurry and deal with this matter immediately*, Mia determined right as a longing growl resounded from her stomach.

"Hmm..." Mia nodded and rubbed her belly. "I suppose I should speak with them over breakfast. I'm sure it'll be harder to focus on their reports if they are famished as well."

Breakfast was promptly brought to her room. The sound awoke Bel and Patty, who together left. At a glance, the two looked like sisters, and the sight of them once again warmed Mia's heart. In this moment, she was the Adult Big Sister Mia Luna Tearmoon.

In any case, Mia welcomed Ludwig and Dion, the latter of which was followed by a sulking Aima.

"My, you're here as well, Aima? In that case... My apologies, but could we get another serving?"

"Actually, milady, His Majesty has requested to eat breakfast with you," Anne awkwardly stated.

"Have Patty and Bel deal with him." Mia ignored Anne's words

with a smile, but she didn't forget to properly follow up those words. "And tell him I'll make sure that we have lunch together." As a capable adult and big sister, she had mastered the art of ignoring and diverting.

"But just what brings you all here? It's rare for the three of you to visit me at once," said Mia as she gobbled down some bread. It was cooked to perfection, and the butter was passable even if it paled in comparison to that of the Equestrian Kingdom. Additional bread was brought in, and this time, it was covered in honey. Mia gobbled this up too. It was incredibly scrumptious.

While Mia was eating snacks...

"We actually encountered the Serpent assassin last night."

Dion's words had her gulping down her bread. Secretly, Mia lamented the fact that the bread she had planned to savor was gone so quickly. "My! I would have never guessed something like that would happen without me knowing. Are either of you hurt?" Mia's eyes were trained on Aima, who looked incredibly apologetic.

"I am ashamed. Had I not been overconfident, our enemies would not have escaped us." She hung her shoulders.

Mia shook her head. "No, as long as you weren't hurt, there's nothing to worry about."

"But..."

"I know that you accompanied us to take revenge for your brother, and that you decided to serve as one of my guards in your brother's place. However, you're still my friend. Since you're safe, I don't mind letting them escape."

"Princess Mia... My dear friend..." muttered Aima. She was moved to tears, and it reflected in her voice.

Mia turned her attention away from Aima and toward Dion. "You did well, Dion. Thank you for protecting Aima."

"Hearing that makes me feel a bit better, but they really got one over on us," said Dion with a defeated shrug.

Mia shook her head. "If they escaped in spite of your presence, there was nothing we could do. They must have been quite skilled."

Dion chuckled. "I can't argue with that. I underestimated them. The real one I needed to watch out for was that poison master."

Poison master? For a moment, Mia couldn't follow, but suddenly, she recalled who he must be talking about. "Do you mean the man who gave the poison to Prince Echard and kidnapped Rina?"

“His name is Ka Kunlou. He’s a member of the Fire Clan, though his skills with a sword are nothing remarkable,” said Aima with a scowl.

Ludwig nodded. “Wits are at times mightier than the sword. Just as we have Her Highness, our enemies must have brains behind them as well. We must remember that well. Though of course, I doubt they can compare to Her Highness.”

Mia nodded. “You’re right. We must stay vigilant. To think our enemies had a comrade who shares my genius…”

How presumptuous!

Chapter 20: A Burbling Lullaby

The next day, Mia and her group hurried back to Lunatear in order to visit the Schuberts' residence. Thankfully, Matthias left the party once they had returned to the capital.

"It's been a while since I've met with Marquess Schubert. Perhaps I should also..." Matthias had muttered and Mia had ignored.

Upon hearing Mia's request, Letizia readily led them inside the manor. "I believe this is the instrument House Clausius left to us." She had brought them to an odd instrument combining a wooden box and a ceramic vessel.

"My, this is an instrument? It has such an odd shape..."

"It's a unique item owned by the Clausiuses that makes music with paper." With that, Letizia placed a large piece of paper in the box and cranked the handle at its side. The hole-filled page was sucked inside the machine as the chiming of ceramic reverberated through the room.

"My, what a pleasant sound. It's marvelous."

The clanking sound wasn't perfectly synced, but it resounded at a near constant rhythm. Mia couldn't help but get excited at the idea of a small man inside playing the drums! But when she looked toward Patty, she noticed the young girl wore a puzzled look.

"Um... Didn't Gerta tell you how to use it?"

Letizia tilted her head. "'How to use it'?" she echoed. "Is this not the right way?"

Patty nodded. "You need to put water inside for it to sound good." With that, Patty stood on her tiptoes and removed the porcelain vessel from the top of the box.

"You put water in it?" asked Letizia, puzzled.

Patty nodded once again. "You fill it up to this line."

Mia peered inside the vessel and noticed a faint line was drawn inside. After filling it with water just as Patty directed, the vessel was placed back on the box. Then, Letizia spun the handle once again.

“Sweet moons!”

The music that now resounded was completely different from the simple rhythm they heard before. Notes overlapped to form a score as proper as the sacred hymns that were played in churches.

“Amazing! I didn’t know there was anything out there like this! How does it work?” For a moment, Mia was overjoyed. “My, but why does it sound so unsettling?”

The music that played consisted of beautifully overlapping notes, but it sounded disharmonious as well. Some unpleasant notes had made their way into the mix.

“If I remember correctly, this is supposed to be a cursed song. Anyone who listens to it is supposed to die in a week.”

“Huh?! I didn’t know such a terrifying song existed!” Mia screamed, but Patty simply scowled.

“I never liked this song because it sounded scary, but all the songs at the Clausius manor were secret songs inspired by evil cult practices.”

“So these were songs used in ceremonies by heretics that had to be hidden from the church, and this instrument was meant to record them for future generations.” In other words, this instrument was part of the legacy of the Serpents. “That was why Gerta didn’t teach you how to use it properly,” said Mia with crossed arms and a nod.

Ludwig looked at the instrument with wonder as well. “So this was the inspiration behind the Yorgos Scale...”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“The Yorgos Scale’s most notable accomplishment was standardizing notes.” Ludwig had Letizia bring him some glasses. Then, he put different amounts of water in each one and flicked them to create sound. “Depending on the amount of water in the glass, the pitch of the sound it creates changes. Using this method, he was able to standardize and spread musical scales that had once only been passed down by oral tradition alone. For example, you could say a glass with water up to this line is note one, and a water up to this line is note two. Just like that, you can decide upon a common scale.”

“How fascinating.” Mia looked toward Patty. “Then if we put this paper in the instrument, it’ll play music. Hmm...? But the size doesn’t seem to be quite right.” Mia compared the “bug-eaten” paper in her hands to the one that stuck out of the instrument. “The

one currently being played seems to be four times the size of this one."

"You're not supposed to stick this one in the instrument." Patty took the paper from Mia and traced it with her finger. "The first note is this sound." She flicked one of the glasses Ludwig had prepared. "The next one is this, and then this..." With each clink, notes of different pitches reverberated, combining into a single song. "This is how Hannes and I played."

The song she played was hard to describe and both lugubrious and nostalgic...

"Hmm... I see. So Great-Uncle Hannes wrote a song in memory of his past and placed it inside a book." Considering that its location seemed to have some meaning behind it, the answer Mia arrived at was quite disappointing.

"I'm not so certain," muttered Ludwig with a scowl. "If that were the case, there would be no need to open any holes. He'd simply need to record it with a pen. The fact there are holes in this paper suggests he wanted others to connect it to this instrument."

"Then perhaps he had a message he wanted to convey only to Patty..."

Suddenly, Yanna opened her mouth. Until then, she had been listening to the song that Patty played in silence. "This song... My mom used to sing it."

"Huh?" Mia was flabbergasted.

Yanna continued on excitedly. "My mom used to sing this song to us as a lullaby!"

"Huh? It's a song your mother would sing?"

Yanna nodded. Then, she took a breath and began to sing.

"*In the Western sky, there are three moons*
In the Eastern dawn, there are six suns.
An ancient promise says
We shall one day return to that land
We shall one day return to the foggy sea."

"'We shall one day return'... That line seems to be important. The last part of that song sounds a bit strange, though. The pitch keeps changing from high to low." She glanced at Patty, who modded.

"That part wasn't on this paper. The melody just repeated." She looked down at the paper in her hands.

Yanna giggled awkwardly. "Our mom might have remembered

it wrong. I always thought the song was strange too." She closed her eyes as if she were watching something far in the distance. "She might have gotten lost in the song and messed up the last bit... I remembered it better because it sounded so strange, but our mom was never good at singing. But since she sang it to us every day anyway, the lyrics stuck," she said with a sorrowful smile. She likely remembered her mother better than the younger Kiryl, making those memories painful.

Mia approached Yanna, wanting to give her a pat on her head. However, Patty moved quicker. She came over and rubbed Yanna's back, just like Yanna had done for her the other day. Her movements were gentle and kind. Anne, Bel, and Citrina watched over the younger girls with kindness in their eyes.

Hmm...it seems like those two are okay. For now, my job needs to be using my brain power! Well, *that* was a reckless thought.

"Why don't we get things in order? First, Great-Uncle Hannes diligently read through *The Book of Those Who Crawl the Earth*. Then, the music for a song Yanna and Kiryl's mother used to sing was discovered in his room. I believe we should assume those two facts are connected." Mia glanced at Patty. "Do you have any connections to the Visalians, Patty? Were you from Ganudos by any chance?"

Mia had yet to ask about her life before she was adopted into House Clausius. However, Patty shook her head. "I was born and raised in Tearmoon. I've never heard this song before."

"Then there really must be a reason he left this song in particular."

"I'm curious as to why he bothered to open holes in the paper as well," said Ludwig as he adjusted his glasses. "As I stated earlier, he could simply record the song with a pen if that had been his goal. Opening holes isn't necessary to record music using the Yorgos Scale, especially if it was meant as a memo for himself. The fact that the holes have been opened regardless seems to point to this instrument."

"I see. So basically, um... This paper may have been a way for Great-Uncle Hannes to convey this song to someone in particular." Mia gave Ludwig a side stare in hopes he would confirm she had construed things correctly.

Ludwig gave a satisfied nod. Apparently, she was right!

"But I'm still interested in this Yorgos Scale. There's a chance

Priest Yorgos invented this himself, but I think it's better to assume he was an acquaintance of Great-Uncle Hannes's." Mia cut off her words and looked out the window. "In any case, a trip to Ganudos Port Country seems to soon be in order. I'll have to contact Esmerelda and have her help us prepare. I see I'm about to be busy," muttered Mia. However, her prediction didn't quite come true; it would be a little while longer before her journey to Ganudos.

It was only once fall had begun to turn to winter that Ka Kunlou, who was trying to whip up a conspiracy in Ganudos, received the unfortunate news that Hurricane Mia was fast approaching Ganudos's shores. It came just when he had built some connections and had decided to start spreading the seeds of evil. Things were just starting to get fun for him, but a wrench was thrown in his plans.

His situation was one of the countless minor tragedies that could be found anywhere in the world. As of now, no one could have anticipated what Hurricane Mia had in store.

Chapter 21: Summer Break Approaches Its End

Once summer had neared its end, Mia received three letters. One was from Duke Lorenz Yellowmoon, and it had been delivered straight to the Whitemoon Palace by Citrina. According to the letter, Hannes had been extradited to Ganudos Port Country just as Mia and friends had predicted.

"So he really is alive. Still..." Mia looked to Citrina.

She shook her head. "Even my father didn't know of Marquess Hannes's illness."

"In that case...perhaps he never mentioned it to Duke Yellowmoon." Ludwig, Mia's brains, was naturally standing beside her. Mia was an incredibly thorough woman; she would never leave behind the source of her wisdom when it was time to use her brain.

Citrina nodded in agreement. "I doubt there was time to share such details. Us Yellowmoons are assassins, after all."

"Indeed. If they took him to a foreign land under the guise of assassination, he would not have the time nor wits to discuss such things."

In any case, if Hannes was still alive, Mia was dead set on meeting him. With that in mind, Mia opened her second letter, which was from the Jade Moon Ministry. She read its contents and groaned. "King Ganudos is the same man as always..."

Mia handed the letter to Ludwig with a sigh. After reading it through, he passed it to Citrina and folded his arms. "The king of Ganudos is quite the crafty man. I see he will not entertain us with a formal request," said Ludwig with a troubled scowl.

According to the letter, Ganudos Port Country was quite busy, so they would be unable to properly receive Mia even should she visit...though that was said in a much more roundabout way and with a veneer of politeness, of course.

"Hmm... He tried to evade me last time too," muttered Mia as she recalled the previous timeline. At the height of the revolution,

Mia had naturally tried to request the aid of Ganudos alongside Perujin, but no matter how many times she requested that the king speak with her, he evaded her using one excuse after another.

"The fact he won't publicly take an offensive stance makes this even more troublesome. Just what can we do... Would it be possible to do our investigations without their support and under the assumption that they may interfere?" asked Mia.

Ludwig pondered this for a moment. "It would not necessarily be *impossible*, but it would be quite difficult... As you know well, Your Highness, he is quick-witted. It is hard to predict how he may try to interfere."

"You're right. Hmm... In that case, we'll have to have Duke Greenmoon mediate for us, and for that, I suppose we'll need Esmerelda's aid."

Mia was clueless as to why the king of Ganudos was so uncooperative. It was true that going along with the first emperor's plan could line his pockets, and that should Tearmoon fall to chaos, Ganudos would be able to chip off land, influence, and anything else to strengthen their nation. Alternatively, it was also possible the king was a staunch ally of the Serpents and was trying to destroy Tearmoon to bring about disorder, but...the ambitions of the first emperor had already fallen through. Mia couldn't see any reason he may have to oppose her, and it left her at a total loss.

Mia opened the third letter with a groan. It was from Rafina, and it recorded the answers to the questions that Mia had asked in her own missive. After looking it over, she let out an odd, "Oho ho..."

There were two lines of particular import and intrigue. The first was: "The Yorgos Scale was certainly invented by a priest named Yorgos who has been sent to Ganudos Port Country." The second was: "That reminds me, summer break is almost over. I sincerely look forward to seeing you once again at Saint-Noel's."

"B-But..." For some reason, Mia found this letter awfully intimidating. "This is so overbearing! She makes it sound like I *absolutely* must return! If I were to stay behind, then there's no knowing what..."

Suddenly, Bel raised her voice. She had come to play with Citrina. "Ah! Miss Mia, this is terrible! The words 'Empress Prelate' have returned to Mr. Ludwig's diary!"

"Eek!" Miz was frozen in shock.

Bel giggled. “Just kidding!” She seemed awfully pleased.

Mia, on the other hand, shook her head with a sour frown. “Bel, there is nothing funny about such jokes.” Mia’s hunch that staying behind would leave Rafina so despondent it would turn her back into the ferocious lion was real—at least to Mia. “Still, we must regularly attend our classes... I want Yanna and Kiryl to learn all they can, but more importantly, I can’t have *you* skipping class, Bel!”

Mia’s glare had Bel flinching in fear.

“If we don’t hurry back to the academy, the Empress Prelate really will arrive, according to you! We have no other choice but to return to Saint-Noel’s once summer break is over, just as we originally planned.”

“Huh? B-But it was just a joke, Miss Mia! There’s no need to rush to—” Bel was so flustered she was rushing her words.

Mia flashed her an evil grin. “Bel, we must all reap what we have sown, and we must do so ourselves. Got it? You need to accept the consequences of your jokes.” Mia spoke an unwavering truth about the human experience and crossed her arms. “The only issue is Patty. She thought we could finally go search for her brother. She’ll likely not be too pleased with this news.”

Contrary to Mia’s expectations, Patty readily agreed to this new plan. “I think there’s a lot of things I can learn in this world too, so...”

Mia was moved to see her grandmother speak such laudable words. “But really, just what made you and Bel so different? Why is the descendant of such a studious woman, so... Could this be my father’s influence, or perhaps Bel’s mother’s? Just what kind of person has to appear between the two to make Bel so lazy and averse to studying?”

Mia failed to even consider that the possible culprit was Bel’s *own* grandmother.

Chapter 22: A Tea Party with the Illustrious Daughter of Duke Greenmoon

Having resolved to return to Saint-Noel Academy, Mia got to work completing what needed to be done at the capital. Just what was that? A tea party with Esmerelda, of course!

"Given that we'll need her help with Ganudos, I must lay the groundwork now."

Her main goal was *definitely* not the novel foreign teacakes the Greenmoons owned. It would be a grave mistake to think so. Anyway, Mia soon made a visit to the Greenmoons' residence in Lunatear.

In the previous timeline, I heard Ganudos conducted all relations with Tearmoon via the Greenmoons. Things should go more smoothly if Duke Greenmoon makes the request for us.

On a personal level, Mia was not too fond of Duke Greenmoon. During the previous timeline, he had quickly taken his whole family abroad once things started to go south. Quite simply, he was a traitor, and while Mia had made amends with Esmerelda, she still had some ill feelings when it came to the girl's father.

Well, plenty of the eminent nobles can be annoying to deal with. I could try corresponding with him via my father, but that isn't perfectly reliable. I believe relying on Esmerelda really is my best course of action. After having vowed their loyalty on that one winter's day, Mia had the utmost trust in Esmerelda. *Thankfully, she's the easiest to please among my relatives. I'm sure she'll jump into action if I flatter her a little.* Yes, Mia had the utmost trust in Esmerelda—trust in her simplicity. *Oho ho! Then the biggest issue at hand is finding out what kind of snacks she's prepared! I can't wait!*

That was just a bonus, of course.

In any case, Mia was taking this meeting relatively lightly, but upon seeing Esmerelda's stiff and distant expression, she began to grow a bit nervous.

"Greetings, Your Highness. Our household welcomes you from

the bottom of our hearts." Esmerelda bowed with perfect form.

Mia thanked her, but the whole time, all she could think was, *Just what in the moons is happening? This isn't like her!*

Question marks flitted around Mia's head as she followed Esmerelda. She led Mia to a room with a round table already prepared with tea.

"Then let us drink," she said, completely expressionless. Esmerelda spoke to the maid who was waiting on her—Nina—and stared at Mia. Her gaze was so intense it was as if she were trying to gaze into Mia's soul. In some respects, it looked more like a glare than a stare. There really was something off about Esmerelda today!

"Um... Ah! That's right. Thank you for receiving Sion the other day." Silence wasn't going to start a conversation, so Mia decided to speak up.

"It was nothing. Prince Echard got the chance to chat with his older brother. As his fiancée, it was worth the effort of making the arrangements for me as well." Esmerelda sipped the tea she was brought without so much as cracking a smile. Then, she cut off a piece of the cake at the table with her fork and took a bite. Something really *was* off about her today.

Did Sion say something to her? Did she have a fight with her father regarding Prince Echard?

Just as those thoughts raced through Mia's mind, Esmerelda once again began to stare at her. "More importantly, Miss Mia, I heard that you've had quite a lot of fun this summer. *Without* me."

"Huh?"

"Your horse-riding with Ruby, your cooking party with Letizia... Oh! And your recent trip to the Clausius domain. I hear Citrina and plenty of the others were with you too."

"Oh! U-Um, yes... I mean, no! That wasn't us having fun; it was __"

"Shouldn't you spend the most time with me—your best friend—during your summer break?!" She slammed her hand down on the table and stood up.

That soul-felt scream inspired some retrospection from Mia. *Yes! This is it! This is the Esmerelda I know!* Without thinking, Mia gave an approving nod.

"Why are you so pleased, Miss Mia?! I waited desperately for an invitation to spend time with you!"

Her pained cry reached Mia's heart. She lowered her head, as the previous timeline had taught her the pain of waiting for someone who would never come. There was nothing that could shake Mia more to the core than the realization she may have acted the same as that idiot Sion had.

"My actions are inexcusable. Even if I was left having to deal with one issue after another, that doesn't change the fact I left you waiting for me. Today, I want to make up for all the fun we have lost," said Mia with a grin.

Esmerelda was still angrily puffing out her cheeks, but her words had softened. "Well, I suppose I've been expecting this moment for quite some time now. I understand that you were busy, so I won't bring the matter up anymore, but...I am always waiting for you, Miss Mia. Please do not forget that you are always welcome here." Then, she averted her eyes. She truly was the illustrious (read: tsundere) daughter of Duke Greenmoon.

"That reminds me. I missed my chance to ask earlier, but what did you discuss with Sion and Prince Echard?"

The other girl tilted her head. "Hmm... I mostly stayed out of their conversations. There are certain things you can only discuss with family, after all."

Mia was absolutely flabbergasted. Esmerelda—the famous eye-candy-loving Esmerelda—chose *not* to attend a conversation between two handsome princes? Mia could hardly believe it. *Well, she does have younger brothers herself. It wouldn't be odd for her to be considerate to Sion given the situation*, thought Mia as she sipped her tea and took a bite of a macaron. Both were incredibly delicious.

"I took the time to chat with Tiona. Her younger brother is studying at the same academy as Prince Echard, after all."

"Right, Cyril. Oho ho! He's quite the promising scholar in the making, isn't he?"

For some reason, Esmerelda responded to Mia's bragging seriously. "Indeed. I was quite shocked to hear about the joint

research with Perujin. I do know of the recent crop failures, but it's absolutely astounding you were able to foresee this outcome and unite such talent." She placed a hand to her cheek. "It will be quite wonderful for a genius with such a discerning eye despite his young age to have connections with my husband Echard."

She slipped in "my husband" so casually. Well, I suppose that will be true one day, but she's quite quick to the punch. Mia shook her head in exasperation. While many may have a vague recollection of Mia referring to the High Priestess of the Serpents as her "older sister," Mia had already forgotten.

"Once again, I want to reiterate that we Greenmoons will do all we can to support Saint Mia Academy. We'd be happy to discuss staff, funds, or anything else whenever you need."

"That would be wonderful, Esmeralda. I know your family will be able to serve the school excellently."

The Greenmoons had always had strong personal connections overseas; their cooperation in running the school would certainly prove useful. Just as Mia was calmly mulling that over, new snacks were brought before her. "My, what is this?"

"It's a palate cleanser."

The item in question was made of translucent cubes covered in a golden yellow sauce and plated in a deep dish. They were bite-size and resembled the dice used in board games.

Just what are these clear cubes?

Mia investigated by hitting one with her spoon. It jiggled. Then, she picked it up with the spoon, thoroughly covered it in honey, and ate it in one bite, causing a cool sweetness to spread over her tongue.

"It's cold! Just what is this?"

Esmerelda giggled. "It's lunar agar-agar, a sweet made from dried seaweed. I hear it has a long history in Ganudos."

"I see..."

Mia placed another of the clear dice in her mouth. With the conviction that she would swallow the whole of Ganudos...she slowly chewed on it.

"It has such a unique flavor... It's similar to gelatin, but tougher, as you can cleanly bite chunks out of it. This unique texture really is rather... Oho ho!"

To Mia, a first-time encounter with a new sweet was the greatest pleasure out there. *The Greenmoons don't disappoint! I'm*

impressed they bring me a new sweet to try every time I visit!

But as that wonder passed over her, Mia once again began to mutter. “Ganudos…” If they had sweets like this, Mia *definitely* wanted to get on their good side.

“So you really were troubled over Ganudos… I was convinced the king was easy to deal with, but it seems he’s stubborn. How rude of him to cause trouble for you…” Esmerelda bit her nails, her disappointment clear. But in an instant, she had regained her normal composure. “But yes, if he respects His Majesty’s—no, just the first emperor’s—wishes, his stubbornness makes sense. The new vow we made conflicts with the continuous, older vow with the first emperor.” Esmerelda was the first to jump on board to swear a new oath at the winter Claire de Lune, and she spoke those words with a reassuring grin. “Rather, it’d be a bit disappointing without a challenge.”

“Oho ho! I see you’re quite dependable,” said Mia with a grin. “You brought what I came here to discuss with you before I had the chance. There is something in Ganudos I absolutely must do, but for that, I’ll need the king’s cooperation…or at the very least, I’ll need to keep him in check.” Mia closed her eyes. “So, I want you to use your Greenmoon tricks to placate him.”

Those words earned a winning grin from Esmerelda. “Oho! Just leave it to me, Miss Mia. I’ve already begun laying the groundwork. I hope you’re excited for what I have in store!” She spoke with absolute confidence.

Chapter 23: A Grand Welcoming

In order to prepare for her visit to Ganudos, Mia followed up her tea party with a visit to all the influential people in Tearmoon. After countless meetings, greetings, and tea times, summer break reached its end.

"You could leave just Bel and the other children behind, right?" Mia's father had earnestly asked. Mia, on the other hand, ignored him and headed off on her journey back to the academy.

"This summer was quite packed... There was the horsemanship tournament, the Schuberts, the old Clausius manor... Huh? Might I have lost a bit too much weight after all that?"

Mia squeezed her upper arms. The results were...

"How odd."

...terribly tragic! But such was life.

Anyway, Mia's carriage passed over the Tearmoon border without incident and approached Belluga. The pilgrimage paths that connected Lunatear and the Holy Principality of Belluga were famous for their safety. They were plenty crowded, and incidents of robbery were rare. But that also meant it was easy to let your guard down.

"I thought there was a chance that the Serpents might attack again, but it seems like my worries are unfounded. I suppose that even the unlikely does happen."

It was impossible for Mia to even fathom the wish the Serpents had to not see her for a long, long time.

Anyway, Mia's trip to Saint-Noel's was peaceful, but right as the journey neared its end, a group of cavalrymen approached the carriage.

"My... What's that?"

They didn't seem to have any plans to attack; instead, they approached slowly and peacefully.

"A merchant band, perhaps? Or maybe the private forces of a noble? Ah, that's right. I met a similar group on my return to Tearmoon. I do hope Hildebrandt is doing well."

Mia was worry-free as she watched the group. But then, she noticed something that gave her pause.

"Long time no see, Mia."

"M-Miss Rafina?"

Somehow or another, the leader of this horseback band was the Holy Lady Rafina Orca Belluga.

"What a surprise! I see you've learned how to ride on horseback alone," Mia absentmindedly muttered as she observed Rafina's imposing horseback figure. She sat atop Kayou, a moonhare. She was a smart horse, making her a good fit for beginners, but...

She's improved quickly, considering she had never even been on horseback until recently.

Rafina giggled. "What do you think? I practice during the summer. Now I can go riding with you whenever!" She seemed quite proud of her accomplishments.

Seeing her like this, Mia segued into flattery mode as naturally as she could breathe. "You really are quite impressive, Miss Rafina! You're already riding perfectly."

"Oh! But don't get the wrong idea. I didn't learn how to ride just to play with you, Mia. Now, I'm able to visit remote villages and meet more of my people. Don't you think the ability to ride the horses the Holy Deity blessed us with is an essential skill for the Holy Lady?"

Her grandiose speech had Mia giggling. "Oho ho! You're starting to sound like Malong."

Those words had left Mia's mouth without so much as a thought, but in a flash, Rafina was frozen. Yet just as fast as she froze, she melted back into her usual calm smile. She opened her mouth to speak, but someone else was quicker.

"Of course she is! This whole summer, she's used learning to ride as an excuse to see Malong! Obviously she'd—"

"*Bel.*" Rafina's sudden words were clear. She spoke with a cold smile, its depth as deep and frigid as a frozen lake.

"That was close! The words 'Empress Prelate' almost made it back into Mr. Ludwig's diary!" Bel made a disquieting joke. For some reason, Mia felt that Bel had grabbed the tail of the sleeping lion and was wagging it around recklessly.

She hurried to change the topic. "I see Kuolan is with you as well." Mia's eyes had been drawn to Kayou's sweetheart. It had been quite a while since her last meeting with the rambunctious

steed, and Mia felt the same fondness one feels when reuniting with an old comrade in arms. “I spent the summer riding Dongfeng. How nostalgic,” said Mia with a giggle.

“Actually, I brought him here hoping you might join me for a ride. Will you?” Rafina tilted her head. It was clear that her wish to ride with Mia was no simple request, but a deep desire.

“Hmm… After riding Dongfeng for so long, I’ve grown used to riding more obedient horses.” Mia looked at Kuolan and grinned. “But it’s quite fun riding more rambunctious horses every once in a while as well. I’ll take you up on that offer, Miss Rafina.”

“Teehee! A horse ride with Mia. Ah! We should have some tea later as well. It all sounds so fun!” responded Rafina with a grin. Behind her stood Aima, clearly ready to accompany the two on their ride as well. Rafina, however, didn’t even notice.

Chapter 24: Mia Goes Along for the Ride!

After taking up Rafina's offer, Mia changed into her riding clothes and gallantly hopped onto Kuolan's back. If she could go along for the ride Rafina was about to lead her on, she could ride a horse, and with a little fat riding on her, she could easily ride waves. In other words, Mia was a princess who knew how to go along for the ride.

Rafina and Mia brought their horses close together. Then, a third horse approached. "Aha ha! You ride well, Holy Lady," complimented Aima on horseback. With a puffed out chest and folded arms, she observed Rafina with an approving nod. There was something perhaps...what's the word...*haughty*...about her attitude, but well, that could be overlooked considering she had warded off the Serpent assassin. She had admirably defended against the crafty Kunlou and the bandana-wearing assassin, and she had even overcome her fear of Dion Alaia!

Doubting these facts would be uncouth. The number of truths equaled the number of people in the world, and if that was Aima's truth, there was no denying it. In any case, Aima's exaggeration was unavoidable and natural. Probably.

Anyway, Aima's haughty expression was juxtaposed by Rafina's *annoyed* expression. But she was the Holy Lady, after all. She hid her vexation behind a cool grin and looked toward Mia. "As I mentioned earlier, I've visited much of the Equestrian Kingdom. The Forest Clan taught me to ride while I was there."

"Malong, yes? He's an excellent rider. If he was your instructor, then it is only natural that you are so skilled."

"Not quite. It was Malong's younger sister who taught me." She stated those words flatly, but...

My, I didn't know that Rafina was close to Malong's family as well. Could this mean...?

Rafina was completely ignorant of the fact that Mia's mind had

entered romance mode as she watched her friend with a calm grin. “By the way, how was your summer break, Mia?”

“Ah, well...” Mia considered her answer. *Esmerelda wasn’t too pleased with the fact I didn’t come and see her during my break, and while I don’t think Miss Rafina is on the same level as Esmerelda, it’s still possible she may react similarly. That means I should highlight...*

Mia made a split-second decision and began to speak. “It was quite troublesome. There was actually quite a bit of drama regarding Ruby’s engagement...” Mia needed to exaggerate her busyness to Rafina and make it clear that she had no other reason not to reach out to Rafina besides the fact she had been swamped. “Her betrothed-to-be was actually my cousin on my mother’s side. We were all in quite a panic, as Ruby already has another man in her heart.”

“My! How unexpected. And how did you resolve this matter?” Rafina was hooked.

Mia gave an all-knowing nod. “You see, I actually held a horsemanship tournament with the Redmoons.”

Aima chuckled. “I pitched in to help my dear friend in that fight.” She haughtily puffed out her chest. “Before my trusty steed Keilai, such a competition was child’s play! Though, it was nothing too noteworthy...” Perhaps Aima had noticed her hubris, for she now wore a humbler expression. “In any case, there is no greater joy than getting to aid my friend.”

“Oho ho! Thank you again, Aima. You really saved us back there,” responded Mia with a smile as she watched Rafina out of the corner of her eye. Rafina was wearing the same grin as always. Yes, as always...but for some reason, Mia was back in the previous timeline. *H-Huh? Wait, but this looks just like the smile she had back when she wouldn’t even give me the time of day!*

“So, um... What happened after the horsemanship tournament?”

“Th-That’s right. We visited Sapphias’s fiancée and had...a cooking party.”

“A cooking party?” Rafina’s cheek twitched.

Mia hurried to cover herself. “Oh, but that was quite troublesome as well! There was a maid who worked for the Serpents there. We were all almost poisoned!” Frantically, Mia tried to highlight the fact that this was a matter of life or death and *not* a fun excursion. She begged with all her heart that sentiment wouldn’t fall on deaf ears, firmly trying to phrase her argument so

that Rafina would be glad she hadn't been there. However...

"A cooking party..." Rafina wasn't having it. She muttered those words over and over as she stared off into the distance. But then, she grinned as if she had managed to compose herself. "I see... So? What happened next?"

"O-Oh, right. Afterward, we visited the old Clausius manor—ah, House Clausius is the house my grandmother hailed from—to look for tracks left by the Serpents. Oh! And I had a tea party with Esmerelda. Oho ho! She told me she'd be willing to help support Saint Mia Academy and that she would help me out with Ganudos. I was so glad to see how dependable she's become."

While Mia spoke with a grin, Rafina was slightly frowning. "Dependable help from Esmerelda, you said? I see..."

While it was unclear whether he truly understood their discussion, Kuolan pricked up his ears and let out a deep sigh.

Chapter 25: An Unexpected Visitor and an Unanticipated Request

Upon Mia's return to Saint-Noel Academy, she reunited with her friends. While she had met with Sion and Tiona at the Schuberts' residence, a long time had passed since her last meeting with Rania, Chloe, and the rest. Her excitement to see her friends brought a natural smile to her lips.

Mia received warm greetings from the Mia faction, Tatiana, Julius, and many of the students from the SEEC program. *Thinking back on it, I never received a true greeting from a friend back in the previous timeline*, thought Mia, filled with emotion. During her previous time at Saint-Noel Academy, Mia had exchanged greetings with countless classmates, and many had come to see her off on her return to Tearmoon whenever a session at school came to an end. There had been plenty who celebrated her return as well.

Yet, the number of those who had genuinely done so was undoubtedly infinitesimal, and the majority motivated undoubtedly by obligation or self-interest. Given that past, Mia couldn't help but marvel at the fact that now, she was genuinely excited and happy to see her friends.

I only have two and a half years left here at the academy. I want to make sure I spend those days with no regrets.

Mia looked up at the bright sky. "It'll be autumn soon. I hope the student council can plan a fun event to put on. A mushroom-gathering competition, perhaps? It's quite fun walking through the forest while the leaves are changing color, and if we mobilize the whole student body, we'll have plenty of mushrooms. Oho! This is an excellent idea." Having not learned from her past mistakes, Mia began to hatch a plan that would beget countless student victims.

After having made the rounds, Mia returned to her room to laze around. That's when there was a sudden knock at her door. Anne ran to answer it and promptly came to report to Mia. "You have a visitor, milady."

“For me? I wonder why... I was just about to enjoy a good autumn nap.” Mia brought the corner of her lips down into a slight frown. But after she had given her stomach a good rub, she got out of bed with some effort. “I suppose it would be terribly rude to keep a visitor waiting. I should provide some tea and snacks for them. Could I have you go and prepare those, Anne?”

A select few knew well that visiting Mia right when her stomach was starting to get empty made it quite probable that she would prepare delectable snacks for their enjoyment, but anyways...

Saint-Noel Academy was a place where the children of royalty and nobility of neighboring countries gathered. It wasn’t rare to receive visitors, and a room had been prepared just for that purpose. It was built like a café, and as Mia headed there, she pondered what teacakes would be best for today. “By the way, Anne. Who is this visitor?”

Ludwig would have sent a letter, so Mia was quite certain it had to be a merchant of some sort, the two heading that list being Chloe’s father and Shalloak. However, Anne’s answer was completely outside these expectations.

“According to the staff member who came to deliver the message of her arrival, it’s the princess of Ganudos Port Country.”

Mia froze. “The princess of...Ganudos?”

The café space set up for greeting guests was located in a corner of the academy’s courtyard. Chairs and tables were not only set up inside the room, but outside of it, and that was where Mia’s guest was waiting for her. Feeling a tad sleepy due to the warm, pleasant light of the sun, Mia upped her guard.

If she purposefully came to visit now knowing that I’d be drowsy and thus have my guard down, she’s an enemy I must approach with caution. She was the princess of *the* Ganudos, after all; there was no knowing what sort of tricks she may have up her sleeves.

Mia stepped forward, ready for battle, and, noticing her, the princess of Ganudos stood up and began to walk toward her. Mia was left staring in awe at her advancing figure. She was huge—roughly two heads taller than Mia—and looking up at her was like gazing at the sky. She lifted up the skirt of her lavish dress and curtsied.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Your Highness. My name is Orania Perla Ganudos, and um... I’m the princess of Ganudos Port

Country.” She bowed, causing her luxurious, wavy hair to dance. It was adorned with a peculiar accessory. Was it a spear? No, there were holes open in the arrowhead, making it look similar to the head of a fish. Was it a fishbone?

For a moment, Mia was enraptured by this odd ornament, but she quickly regathered herself and responded with a curtsy of her own. “I am Princess Mia Luna Tearmoon of the Tearmoon Empire. Princess Orania.” Mia exchanged her grin for a stern stare. “What is it exactly that brings you here to visit me?”

Orania, on the other hand, looked a bit spaced out and responded with a troubled look. “Um, I’m, uh... Would you allow me to enroll at Saint Mia Academy?”

“*Huh?*”

Mia was flabbergasted by this sudden turn of events.

Chapter 26: The Plan to Raise Mia Elites Marches On in Secrecy!

Esmeralda Etoile Greenmoon was a woman recognized by posterity as one of Mia's dearest friends, known for her pride in the nobility, the superficial friendliness she showed those under her, and a deep kindness that undermined that all. However, she is little recognized for any accomplishments as a public figure. While her efforts are little recorded on the stage of history, the contributions she made were nevertheless grand.

Just as Sapphias Etoile Bluemoon served as an Etoilin by keeping Tearmoon's nobles in check, Esmeralda served her role as an Etoiline admirably. She wasn't just sitting around in her manor wondering when Mia would next call on her! Well, there were such days, but she still did her work regardless.

Esmeralda had made her move the day after Sion visited.

"I suppose Ganudos is the next matter at hand." Even before Mia had come to visit her, Esmeralda had correctly set her sights on the nation and resolved to soon visit it herself. The Etoiline's quick jump to action greatly resembled the girl who had recently been in her heart—Mia. Though, it should be mentioned that the preparations for this trip had completely been thrown onto Nina's shoulders. She was an excellent maid who could admirably serve the roles of both Anne and Ludwig.

"You certainly are skilled, Nina—just what I'd expect from a Greenmoon maid!"

Nina didn't even grin in response to Esmeralda's praise. Instead, she bowed her head. "I am humbled by your exorbitant compliments, milady. However, if I may...I do not think it is fitting for a daughter of the Four Dukes to remember the name of a lowly maid."

"Huh? What are you saying?! You're my dear maid who has served me since we were young! Of course I would remember your name." Esmeralda looked awfully proud as those words left her

mouth.

Nina responded with a despondent sigh. “Well, I suppose...”

Esmeralda gave her maid a curious look, but in any case, she would thus be heading to Ganudos.

We now shift time and place to the future, after Esmeralda had arrived at her family’s villa in the capital of Ganudos. There, she prepared to greet a guest—or really, Nina did. Nevertheless, Esmeralda looked at the china and teacakes spread out on the table with a grin. “Oho ho! It’s been quite a while since our last tea party!”

After a short while of waiting, her guest came exactly on time. Well, not really. She arrived about an hour late, but considering this was the norm for the girl, Esmeralda decided to not let it bother her.

“Hello. Thank you for inviting me here today, Lady Esmeralda,” said the girl with a curtsy. She was incredibly tall, having the stature of a stage actress and long, thin limbs. She looked at Esmeralda and grinned.

“You have my deepest thanks for taking the time to see me out of your busy day. It is nothing grand, but I hoped we could partake in a tea party together, Your Highness.”

The girl’s name was Orania Perla Ganudos, the nation’s princess. She and Esmeralda often shared tea together, as the two girls had naturally gotten to know each other through Esmeralda’s frequent visits to the Galilea Sea and meals shared with Ganudos influentials. However...

“Incidentally, Your Highness...” Esmeralda quickly put the small talk aside and made her attack. “I have heard that your father’s attitude toward Tearmoon is quite disquieting.”

“H-Huh? Is it?” Orania watched Esmeralda curiously. She had almost no relation to politics and had purposefully been raised in the palace while cut off from matters of the outside world.

Knowing all this, Esmeralda elegantly brought her teacup to her lips. “Yes, it is. Though, I’ve heard it began in summer of last year, and my dear friend Miss Mia views this as a problem.”

“Princess Mia does?” Orania covered her mouth, her eyes as big as saucers.

“She does. Thus, I was hoping to help solve this issue myself. I deeply treasure our relationship with Ganudos Port Country, and

there would be nothing sadder for relations to fall apart between our two nations. The Tearmoon nobles with the closest ties to Ganudos are us Greenmoons, after all." Esmeralda's expression was nondescript as she took a bite of her cake. Then, she looked up into Orania's eyes. "Thus, I'd deeply appreciate it if you could ask His Majesty to adjust his attitude, if you would..."

"You want...*me* to? I don't really think that would work..." Orania spoke her words slowly and relaxed as she shook her head. Esmeralda took this as a good sign; she was a woman who knew how to negotiate. First, you made a request grander than would be acceptable, then, you made a proposal that *just* avoided pushing the limits of what your opponent would accept.

Backed by that theory, Esmeralda made her real proposal. "Then how does this sound? Why don't you come and study at Saint Mia Academy?"

"Um... I don't think..." Orania's expression was blank for a moment. "Would I be a hostage?" She slowly tilted her head.

Esmeralda nodded with a grin. "Oho ho! You never mince words, do you? Your honesty is one of the things I love most about you." She had taken Orania to be a princess raised locked away in the palace and ignorant of the ways of the world. However, that didn't mean she was stupid. She may have been a sheltered princess, but she had the brains to properly interpret what others were saying. Thus, she had bluntly stated the essence of Esmeralda's proposal.

Esmeralda had long appreciated her honesty and quickness. However, she wasn't trying to take Orania as hostage. Instead, her plan was a bit closer to what Mia might come up with. *Saint Mia Academy is the perfect place to learn all about Miss Mia's greatness. If Princess Orania is enrolled there, we should be able to get her on our side!*

That was her plan, not that Esmeralda could be upfront about it. She continued on with a smile. "It's not such a bad proposal. Saint Mia Academy is planned to be the pinnacle of learning in Tearmoon, and I believe it would be a good opportunity for your own edification as well."

"Um, do you mean I don't have the right to refuse?"

"I'm saying that you have no reason to. It's rare to come by such opportunities. If you refuse, the troublesome demands I'd make from you would be frankly, well... Don't you think it's best if

you accept my offer?" Esmeralda took a nonchalant sip of her tea. "Oh, and I'd like to take some lunar agar-agar back home with me as well. Could you introduce me to a shop where I could buy some?"

Those were some bold final words.

"You'd like to enroll in Saint Mia Academy? What do you mean?" asked Mia, completely flabbergasted. She decided to take the opportunity to take a sip of her tea. She rolled it around her mouth in an attempt to replenish her sugar, but unfortunately, there was no sweetness to be found. *That's right! I asked Anne to keep sugar out of my tea for the time being since I ate too much over the summer!*

It should also be mentioned that Mia made no such requests when it came to her teacakes. She'd refrain from sugary drinks and get her sugar intake via snacks. Mia's silent wish that the teacakes be sweet was so strong it was practically audible, but knowing all this, Tatiana had suggested with a smile that, "Wouldn't it be best to reduce her consumption of sweets as well? For teacakes... Ah, of course! Why not have some dried fish?" Anyways...

Mia cleared her throat and looked into Orania's eyes. The other princess looked back, her expression blank. She tilted her head for a moment, but then, she let out a gasp. "That's right. This is from Lady Esmeralda. Please take a look..."

She handed Mia a letter. Mia looked over its contents, and now, she was finally able to grasp the situation. *So, this is all Esmeralda's doing. It's a result of her operating behind the scenes for my sake.*

A summary of the letter is as follows: "Since it's hard to convince the king of Ganudos using a head-on assault, let's enroll his daughter in Mia Academy, turn her into an elite on your side, and take him from the inside!"

I understand the strategy, but... Mia couldn't help but sigh. Yes, she understood Esmeralda's reasoning, and she didn't think Esmeralda was thinking about this the wrong way. The king of Ganudos was a stalwart fortress with high ramparts and a thick gate. A tough battle awaited anyone who tried to attack head-on, and thus, it was best to avoid doing so. Instead, it was necessary to use other stratagems, such as cutting off his supplies or sending a spy inside his gates.

We won't push him, but whittle down those in his circle. Her plan is excellent, and I'm sure Ludwig and Galv would quite like it. However...

For a moment, Mia was almost convinced to follow along. But then, she scowled. *But what will become of my academy?*

Esmeralda had written some boastful things about Echard in her letter, that he was studious, honest, and pure of heart. Reading all about how great of a husband Echard was going to be one day gave her a bit of an upset stomach, but what really caught her attention was what followed: “Prince Echard is surrounded by good influences. Now, he’s completely converted into one of your followers.”

Surrounded by good influences… My followers… Mia could smell a hint of danger. *I have no need for any more devoted followers. Is Saint Mia Academy really okay?* The letter had inspired some concern for Echard and the other students attending the academy.

It’s also quite risky to enroll someone from Ganudos in the academy. Saint Mia Academy was the research facility for developing a new strain of wheat, and any interference in this endeavor would be disastrous. *Plus, I’m ultimately responsible for the academy. If anything were to happen there, I’d have to deal with it alone. How incredibly unfair.* Mia was a woman who wanted to put avoiding and disseminating responsibilities above all else. Having to bear the weight of a heavy burden all by herself was the worst thing she could imagine. So, what could she do?

Getting her on our side is the main goal in this plan, and it’s something I want too. In that case, I just need to adjust the course of all this. Mia scarfed down one of the cookies in front of her with a gulp. “Princess Orania, I understand that you would like to enroll at Saint Mia Academy.” She placed the letter on the table. “However, as you may already be aware, mostly children attend Saint Mia Academy. I don’t believe it’s a proper place for you.”

Mia wasn’t lying. The students at the academy were quite young, including Echard. Orania would likely find suddenly enrolling as the eldest one there uncomfortable.

“Huh? But…” She scowled.

Mia addressed her with a grin. “There’s no need to worry. I’ll speak to Esmeralda about this myself. I believe she’s made quite the impossible ask of you, after all. However, I’d like to make a proposal of my own.” Mia looked into Orania’s eyes. “Why not attend Saint-Noel’s?”

“U-Um…” Orania hesitated, but this inspired some certainty in Mia. *She’s the type who’s easy to push around. If this goes well, this*

could be our first step toward taking Ganudos. Good job, Esmerelda!

Mia snickered on the inside as she continued to press the girl. "I'll ask Miss Rafina myself. So? How about it?"

Mia leaned over the table and watched as Orania timidly began to nod her head.

Chapter 27: A Proposal from Her Friend Rafina

Mia had Orania spend the night on Saint-Noel Island and immediately went to meet Rafina, who greeted her with a huge grin. Thinking Mia had come for some afternoon tea, given the time, Rafina cheerfully put together some tea paired with a red jam made from flowers she had grown herself. Once Mia had lifted the jam-filled spoon from her tray and dunked it into her tea to mix around, a fragrant floral scent made its way to her nostrils.

"What an excellent aroma. It's not too sweet, but it's delicious all the same."

Rafina giggled. "I'm glad you enjoy it. This jam pairs well with bread too. If you'd like, I could give you some."

"Why thank you, Miss Rafina. Oho ho! I can't wait for breakfast!" Mia's thoughts turned to the bread she'd eat tomorrow morning as she brought up her reason for meeting today. "By the way, there's something I want to ask you."

"My, what is it? I'd love to answer any request from a dear friend such as you," she said with a calm expression.

Mia was already assured of her victory. "It's about Princess Orania of Ganudos, actually."

"Oh... She's the person who came to visit you, yes? What about her?" she asked with a tilted head.

Mia offered her explanation in order. "As I mentioned on our way here, I must visit the country in order to look for my great-uncle, and for that, I'll need the cooperation of Ganudos's king."

Rafina elegantly sipped on her tea and closed her eyes. "I see. So you wish to make Princess Orania one of our allies."

"To put it simply, yes. And for that, I was hoping she'd be allowed to enroll in Saint-Noel Academy."

"I see. The princess of Ganudos...here..." As Rafina pondered, she looked away from Mia...and *toward* the teapot. "Would you like seconds, Mia?"

“Thank you. I would,” responded Mia while looking at the teapot—or rather, the jar of jam beside it.

There had been a slight misunderstanding between them, but Mia had obtained her jam and tea regardless. Once again, Mia breathed out a rapturous sigh at the excellent aroma. It was delicious!

Rafina took a sip of tea, speaking again once her lips had been wet. “Ganudos Port Country is a nation that Tearmoon’s first emperor was involved with. They partially bear the burden of ruining Tearmoon. Am I correct in my understanding?”

“Yes, you are. Luckily, I believe that plan has fallen through, but they have maintained an opposing stance to us regardless.”

“But since they aren’t upfront in their hostility, it is hard to subdue them with force...”

Subdue them with force? I’ve been seeing glimpses of the Empress Prelate in her lately. How frightening! Mia had begun to mistake the noble lady wearing the mask of a lion for a lion wearing the mask of a noble lady.

“If you gained the allegiance of Princess Orania, she may be able to aid you in getting Ganudos to fold. It makes sense. Fathers have quite a weak spot for their daughters, after all,” said Rafina with a sigh as she gazed at the wall. Nothing was hanging there, but Mia could see the phantom of one of Rafina’s portraits.

“They are indeed...” Mia sympathized. The two had a slightly warped image of what a father should be.

“But you really did well to summon Princess Orania here, Mia.”

She shook her head to deny that praise. “I am always glad to receive a compliment from you, but this wasn’t the result of my efforts. It’s all thanks to Esmeralda.”

Rafina lowered her eyes. “Esmeralda, you say...?”

“Yes. The Greenmoons have many strong connections abroad. I believe Esmeralda and Princess Orania had previous connections.”

“Esmeralda, is it...?” Had she heard Mia, or had she not? Rafina stared into empty air for a moment, but then, she returned her gaze to Mia. “I understand. I’ll grant special permission for Princess Orania to enroll.”

“Thank you, Miss Rafina. You have my deepest thanks.”

While Mia had predicted this answer, she was nevertheless relieved to have gotten her approval. However...

“But I have a condition.”

"A condition? What is it?" Mia watched her curiously.

Rafina spent a silent moment searching for the right words before she once again opened her mouth. "I take great pride in the fact that Saint-Noel Academy is the pinnacle of educational institutions on the whole continent. And that's not just because we provide nobles and royals with the best education out there and instill them with morals; it's also the pinnacle of gathered knowledge."

"Yes, of course..."

"So, how does this sound? Why don't we establish a joint research project with Saint-Noel and Saint Mia academies?"

Rafina's proposal had left Mia bewildered. "A joint research project?" muttered Mia as she mulled over her words.

Rafina, on the other hand, nodded sternly as if she had long had the idea. "I hear that your academy is researching wheat."

"Yes, I'm having them develop a strain that is resistant to the cold."

"Famine affects all people, and it is a problem Belluga and the Central Orthodox Church have long been working to solve. Isn't this something we could work together on?"

The Central Orthodox Church was always outstretching a hand to people in need, and the face of the priest who had stepped into the Newmoon District to watch after orphans and the sick flashed through Mia's mind. Yes, he was a man of honorable poverty—and a die-hard fan of Rafina's.

I should send him one of her portraits as a show of my thanks, thought Mia. But at the same time, she had begun to objectively analyze the situation. *I need to consider the pros and cons of this.*

Mia's main concern was Saint-Noel stealing the credit of Saint Mia Academy's work. What would such a situation lead to? *Huh? Is that actually not a problem?*

It was true. If Saint Mia Academy continued their development of the new strain of what alone, the school would gain recognition, and Mia—their founder—would be showered with accolades. Ones *golden* in color.

Mia gulped down a sip of her tea. *If I'm not careful, Bel will be telling me about a new golden statue of Empress Mia built to celebrate her achievements! This could negatively affect public funds, which would bring about all sorts of troubles...* Now, Mia recalled Esmeralda's letter. *Students drawn by my achievements could be turned into my*

followers by those "good influences," and that doesn't sound good! Achievements that ballooned too far tended to summon trouble. *Rather, it's enough to just reap the fruits of those accomplishments. I don't need praise. I just need that wheat to spread across the continent.*

Yes, the Great Sage of the Empire never lost sight of the true matter at hand. And what was truly important here? Getting to eat tasty foods to one's heart's content, of course! And what did she have to do to realize that goal? Make sure no one went hungry!

That was the future Mia sought, and as long as that came to fruition, she was fine no matter who received recognition for those accomplishments. If Saint-Noel Academy was offering to spread their wisdom, there was nothing to do but take advantage of it.

Or it could be put this way. Mia was not after glory or obtaining the means of Tearmoon alone to stave off famine and survive. That wouldn't be enough. Now that she had made her "Bread-Cake Declaration," the scope now far exceeded Tearmoon, encompassing all nearby nations—nay, the whole continent. Thus, using the name of Saint-Noel Academy—a place already known as the pinnacle of education—could be nothing but a boon. Even if Mia didn't lift a finger, the results she was after would come to her. What could be more wonderful than that?

Quite honestly, Mia didn't want to sow any seeds, nor did she want the fruits they'd reap. Ideally, she'd just be able to spread those fruits around afterward.

Well, it is also true that the reason I'm stuck working so hard is because reality isn't so simple. In any case, if someone was offering their aid, Mia wanted to grab hold of it without any hesitation.

"Then let's have Saint-Noel Academy aid in the wheat research, and—" just as Mia was agreeing to Rafina's demands, she shook her head.

"No, that's Saint Mia Academy's research. I would never want us to butt in partway through and steal the credit for that work. Of course, that's not to mean I don't want to offer my aid either." She outright refused. "Not to mention, this is you we're talking about! I'm sure that research has already begun to prove fruitful."

"Well, yes... But rather than me, it's thanks to the efforts of Cyril and Princess Arshia." Mia hurried to correct her. If something went wrong, she didn't want anyone blaming her for it. But more importantly, she had to make sure they were the ones given the credit once their research had gotten some results, as Mia couldn't

stand for anyone claiming that *she* had been the one to steal the credit.

Tiona is Cyril's older sister, after all. It's entirely possible that angering her would reawaken the demon from the revolution! Not to mention, Princess Arshia is royalty of Perujin, and getting on their bad side now would be disastrous.

Mia was meticulous in ensuring that the amicable relationships she had worked to build didn't fall through. Mia Inc. was well known as a company with excellent after-sales services.

Rafina giggled. "I hear from Tiona and Princess Rania that it's quite easy working at Saint Mia Academy and that they provide plenty of support. They're quite thankful for your efforts," she said with a grin. "However, I was thinking that there are plenty of things to research in addition to wheat. I'm not quite sure exactly what that is as of yet, but I'm positive there's something. And if possible, I'd like to ask the monarchs of all nations to support us in those efforts."

"You'd like to declare joint efforts between the academies to fight famine to all nations... In other words, you want to use it as a slogan to incite action."

"Exactly, and I was hoping to find the perfect project for the task."

"That will be difficult," said Mia with a groan. The cold-resistant wheat had been due to Mia's previous knowledge. However, Mia had no ideas when it came to other measures to help fight famine. Mia, at the end of the day, was a yes-man; while she could agree to the plans of others, she couldn't really offer any ideas herself. Thus...

"I see. This isn't the type of question we'll find an answer to immediately, so why don't we each take it home and think on it?"

"Sure, but..." Rafina looked into Mia's eyes, her expression incredibly serious and her cheeks slightly dyed pink. "I... I want to help you as a friend. I believe wholeheartedly in the future you're trying to create, and I'd like to participate in making it a reality. Please do not forget that."

The gravity in which she spoke those words pleased Mia. *Oho! If Rafina's so gung-ho about this, then I have even less to worry about when it comes to the famine. Huh? In that case, can't I sit back and relax?*

Having failed to learn from her mistakes, Mia seemed to be on

the verge of fatally letting down her guard.

Chapter 28: Princess Mia Is Criticized

After concluding her meeting with Rafina, Mia had a new problem to fret over. “Joint research... That’s going to be quite difficult. It’s not like spreading the name of Saint Mia Academy will do us much good...” Gaining name value wasn’t a bad thing, per se, but Mia didn’t think it was something she should focus on. “Though if we’re to discover something new, being able to use Saint-Noel’s name will benefit us. Others will accept a discovery from Saint-Noel Academy quite differently than one from Saint Mia Academy.”

While other nations would consider adopting new technology developed by Saint-Noel’s, they’d hesitate to accept any from Saint Mia’s. Some might simply laugh the name off, while others might even ridicule her for naming a school after herself. Even if the development of cold-resistant wheat were to reach its final stages, it would all be meaningless if no one put it to good use. Thus, Mia wanted to use Saint-Noel Academy’s name value to her advantage.

“If wheat production increases in all nations, then we’re bound to avoid its price inflating.” Mia’s eyes were always set two steps ahead. She was preparing for the Great Famine she knew well, but avoiding *every* impending famine was impossible. “To keep that from happening, we absolutely must prepare.”

Thus, Mia needed to find a research topic that Rafina would be satisfied with, and for that aim, she visited the library. She set up camp at one of the large desks and folded her arms. “It’s quite a shame that food and drinks are banned here, but it’s the perfect place to have a good think. Perhaps I should take this opportunity to get all my problems in order,” muttered Mia as she took out a piece of paper.

“Hmm... Let’s write them all out.” With a scowl, Mia began to scratch words into her paper. “First: must gain the king of Ganudos’s cooperation in finding my great-uncle. We need to search for Marquess Hannes and gain information on everything else we can, and for that...”

Mia wrote “How to Deal with Ganudos” on her paper. Then, she

wrote a note beside this heading that read, “Is the king the one who stands most in our way?”

“Since it seems unlikely we’ll be able to deal with him straightforwardly, deepening my bond with Princess Orania is an absolute must. Esmeralda made some excellent contributions, so I have to make sure I put them to good use.” Mia drew two concentric circles next to the heading before adding another note that read, “But how?”

“It seems like planning and involving her in an enjoyable event is my best course of action…” Mia tapped her pointer finger against her forehead as she moved onto the next matter. “There’s also Rafina’s request for joint research between Saint-Noel and Saint Mia academies. I need to find a topic somewhere.”

Luckily, this room overflowed with reference books she could use. All that was left was to crack open a hefty book, but…Mia silently looked around the room. “Huh? Won’t reading all these be hard?”

Mia had once done some perfunctory (emphasis on *perfunctory*) research about famines. Thus, she had read books before, and from that perspective, partook in more Great Sage of the Empire-like activities than her granddaughter Bel. However, she had no thoughts so admirable as to do that once again and plan research that could help defend against famine.

“What I need is help! It’s rumored that Chloe has read every book in this library. I’ll ask her for some advice and… No, perhaps it’s best I ask everyone in the student council to share their ideas.” Mia wrote a memo to do so on her paper. Personally, she thought this was a wonderful idea. She was more of a yes-man than an idea man, so this would save her from having to come up with any ideas herself.

“Next is… That’s right. I need to plan something fun for us all. In order to win over Orania, I need to plan a fall-time event, and luckily, I’m great at planning fun events! And if it’s autumn we’re talking, the forest filled with colored leaves is the perfect spot!” Mia wrote down a note to go play in the forest. “If I combine this with some mushroom hunting, I’m sure it will be a big hit with everyone!”

Mia wrote the words, “A school-wide mushroom hunt” on her paper. Suddenly, she felt eyes on her. Someone was staring at her, and when she looked around to discover who, her eyes eventually

landed on a young man standing right behind her.

"My, Keithwood! What are you doing here?" asked Mia curiously.

Keithwood, on the other hand, had a smile plastered on his face. Silently, he picked up Mia's pen and crossed those words out.

"Huh? What are you...?" Mia was flabbergasted.

Keithwood's only response was a silent shake of his head.

"Moons, but..." Mia was about to protest, but once again, Keithwood flashed her a kind, calm smile and shook his head. Behind his expression was ultimate wisdom obtained only by those who had discovered the truths that governed this world. Once again, he remained silent.

"Hmm... In that case..." Mia spun her pen over the page and presented her next idea: "Student council + Princess Orania mushroom..." As soon as she had written the word "mushroom," it had been crossed out. But Mia was not the type to give up! She wrote her next idea: "Student council + Princess Orania cooking party."

Upon seeing the words "cooking party," Keithwood's arm began to twitch. Just barely, he managed to hold himself back. With a painful groan, he quelled his raging right hand by grasping it with his left.

Watching him, Mia thought she had a chance. She added another couple of words to her idea: "with mushrooms."

Keithwood's arms moved in a flash. In an instant, those words were exaggeratedly crossed out. The mark was beautifully well written, as if its maker had done so with ultimate relief.

Chapter 29: Thus Sprouts a Small Seed of Resolve

The three youngest members of Mia's retinue were ecstatic to reunite with the other members of the SEEC class. While they had returned from Tearmoon, the others had returned from their own countries. As children from the slums and orphanages, a single goodbye was often an eternal goodbye, and thus, their glee at meeting once again was immeasurable. Smiles overflowed on all their faces, and surrounded by their grins, Patty observed everyone else just as she always did.

"You seem well, Karon."

Having been spoken to by Yanna, Karon lifted the corner of one of his lips into a grin. "You too. It's nice seeing that you and your brother are safe. I was convinced you two had been sold off to some nobles." He was trying to act tough.

Yanna responded with a genuine smile. "Huh? Could it be? Were you worried about us?" she teased.

Karon was ready to argue back, but in the end, all he could do was groan. Yanna's soft smile had rendered him unable to talk back. Yanna had harmonious features, and the eye tattooed on her forehead was mysterious. She looked incredibly lovely whenever she smiled—enough to bewitch anyone.

Until recently, she thought she had to be tough to protect her brother, but now...

If Yanna revealed her heart to others—and if that resulted in betrayal—both her and her brother would suffer. Even after being released from those circumstances, it had taken her a while to completely trust that she was safe. But now, her defenses had finally been let down.

Pleased by this change in her friend and now able to genuinely recognize that pleasure, Patty was left feeling conflicted.

"What a relaxed expression."

Having suddenly been addressed, Patty turned around to find

her bespectacled instructor, Julius. He wore a kind grin, and Patty nodded along with his words.

"It's because Miss Mia showed Yanna all sorts of wonderful things this summer."

Patty was certain that once again, Yanna felt safe to place her trust in Mia. *Maybe she's just used to being protected now...*

Had this been the manor of the Clausiuses—had this been a place to learn the teachings of the Chaos Serpents—this was the exact time they would betray her. This harsh act of treachery would instill a deep-rooted mistrust in her, and this was the very reason Patty still had yet to open her heart. At least, that's what she had thought.

Patty's reply had put an awkward grin on Julius's face. "I was actually talking about you," he said.

Seeing this, Patty brought a hand to her mouth. "Me? Was I...smiling?"

"You were. Oh, but it's not just you. Yanna, Karon, Kyril...all of your expressions have grown much more relaxed compared to when you first came here," he said kindly. "You still seem quite nervous, Patty, but don't worry. It will be all right. We'll all protect you and the rest of your classmates. I'm certain neither Miss Rafina or Princess Mia will abandon you all, so please trust in us and relax."

Something in Patty's chest grew warm at those words. "Thank you, Mr. Julius..."

That warmth wrote Patty's words for her. Now, she could speak from her heart, and it pleased her. But at the same time, she couldn't help but think she would never truly laugh from her heart. Now that she was aware of her situation, she could relax, and she even thought it was possible to make friends she could completely open her heart to in this world. However...

If I'm going to go back, I can't let my guard down completely. Plus...

"Mr. Julius?"

"Hmm? What is it?" he asked, tilting his head.

Patty gathered her resolve. "Mr. Julius, could you tell me about the past?" Patty was certain that the man before her would continue to save countless children, just as he had already done. Thus... "When were you brought to Viscount Overadt's home?"

Barbara had said that her son was dead. There was a chance that she had been deceived, and that the viscount's family had tricked her with a lie. However...

There's a chance that's because I changed the past.

When Patty had heard Barbara's story, she had undoubtedly pitied her. If she had the power to stop it, what would she do? Would she really not go and save that child? Would she let Julius die?

Patty grasped exactly what it meant to have come to the future. The practice of observing and analyzing instilled in her by the Serpents now served her well.

While there may not be much I can do…

Becoming empress didn't make her all powerful; there was still much she was powerless to change, especially under the Serpents' surveillance. If she acted out of line, there was a chance they would take her out. And yet, Patty still had the thought, *There must be something.*

A small seed of resolve sprouted in her chest—the brave resolution to fight against the Serpents.

Chapter 30: Mia Fights a Tough Fight

After getting everything straight in her head, Mia immediately jumped into action on a plan to deepen her bond with Orania.

"Big events bring people together, and thus, I believe one is absolutely in order. But it's also important to have regular relations with her as well. I think I read that somewhere in one of Elise's romance novels..."

After making an utterance based on a rather questionable source, Mia headed off to meet with Orania. While her enrollment at Saint-Noel had been sudden, it had gone over without a hitch. Apparently, Esmerelda had been quite insistent that Orania enter Saint Mia Academy, and thus had made all the preparations necessary so that she could be enrolled the moment Mia gave her permission. With the school in question simply changed to Saint-Noel Academy, proceedings had gone smoothly.

"Hello, Princess Orania. I'm glad you were able to enroll here without any issues." Mia had immediately gone to visit with a large box of cakes in hand. However...

"My, Princess Mia. Thank you for coming all this way," she said with a smile. "And thank you for these delicious cakes. However, I've yet to finish unpacking, so..." After a quick bow, she slammed the door in Mia's face.

"Huh?"

Mia was certain she'd be invited inside for some tea and that they would eat the cakes together. She was trying to kill two birds with one stone! And yet, *this* was how she had been treated.

"W-Well, she may just be busy today. I should visit her again tomorrow."

At least, that's what Mia had thought. The following day, she was turned down because Orania's maid was absent, so she had no one to make Mia's tea, and the day after, she was shooed off with the excuse that Orania just wasn't in the mood for sweets that day.

"She must be avoiding me on purpose." Having the door shut in

her face once again, Mia began to groan.

"H-How terribly rude!" Anne was almost never so angry she saw red, but that wasn't the case today.

"Thank you, Anne, but it doesn't bother me," said Mia with a forced smile. *I see. So, this is her plan...*

Her actions had been undoubtedly rude, and it was hard to imagine an action more insolent than turning down a princess of an eminent nation when she had gone out of her way to visit you. But in Saint-Noel Academy, this could be used as an effective weapon.

"Abusing one's authority to force others to comply in Miss Rafina's backyard is incredibly risky." The Holy Lady was the epitome of virtue, a woman of fairness who would never allow those with power to abuse it. Thus, Mia couldn't act too boldly. Given the circumstances of Orania's enrollment, one wrong move and Mia could be tried for abusing Tearmoon's authority.

"Ugh... What a difficult situation."

Mia was certain that no one could dislike sweets, and she also believed that it was human nature to invite anyone inside who came carrying a box of cakes. And yet...

"This won over Aima in an instant..." mumbled Mia as she stared into the distance. "Those in the Equestrian Kingdom were quite pure and honest, Aima and Xiaolei being prime examples. Sharing a meal and a horse ride was enough for us to get along."

Apparently, bringing cakes or preparing stew was the best method to implement for anyone who wanted to get along with Mia. Mushrooms were the best ingredient to use in the stew, but rabbit could be effective as well. Basically, Mia's reputation was that of a young woman who could be won over completely with just one tasty meal, but anyways...

"I wasn't expecting this treatment from Princess Orania, but there's something nostalgic about it..." Mia closed her eyes. *This is how Miss Rafina used to treat me. Ahhh, how very...bitter...*

Wanting to heal her hurt chicken heart, Mia immediately went to visit Rafina. Hearing, "Who are you again?" from her would have left Mia in irreparable shambles, but luckily, that didn't happen. She was greeted with a huge, heartfelt grin, received tasty jam and tea, and completely recovered. Moved by tears at the gap between her troubles in the previous timeline and the friendly smile Rafina now wore, she muttered, "Ah, how wonderful friends are... Miss Rafina is such a dear friend of mine..."

This only made Rafina's feelings for Mia even stronger, leading to incredibly frequent tea parties. But anyways, Mia had renewed her resolve.

"What I really need is some sort of event, something that will get everyone in good, excited spirits that will help us get close—that's what's important! The only problem is that I don't know what Orania enjoys..." Mia groaned with a scowl. "I'd like to get some ideas from the student council, but Keithwood seems like he'd nitpick everything. That stupid four-eyes told me that if I had an idea, I need to let it out without any criticisms, but Keithwood just won't follow that example."

Mia shook her head in exasperation.

Chapter 31: The Multitasking Princess

The following day, Mia called the student council to a meeting. “A good idea for an event... Hmm...”

Despite those mutterings, the topic at hand was to narrow down ideas for the joint research between Saint-Noel Academy and Saint Mia Academy. Mia was the type who always had room for dessert even after partaking in a hearty meal, making her a multitasking (read: two-stomached) princess. A good idea for an event that would deepen her bond with Orania was an absolute must, but obtaining good ideas for the joint research was important as well.

“Let me inform you all about how Princess Orania came to be enrolled at Saint-Noel Academy.” Mia started the meeting by explaining only the necessary details—again, she was a multitasking (read: two-stomached) princess.

“I see, so that’s how Princess Orania arrived here,” said Sion with folded arms and a grin. “Lady Esmeralda’s foreign connections are as impressive as ever. She’s quite the admirable woman to be able to present the princess of Ganudos to you herself.” Sion frankly praised the skills of his brother’s fiancée.

“Impressive?” Mia wasn’t quite sure she agreed with his assessment, but she returned the discussion to the matter at hand. “I shared this simply so you’d all be aware of the situation, and I might ask for your opinions on the matter another time. What I wanted to discuss with you all today is actually a separate matter.” Mia glanced at Rafina. Once she confirmed her nod, she once again began to speak. “Saint-Noel Academy and Saint Mia Academy are discussing performing some joint research.”

“Joint research? What do you mean, exactly?” asked Abel.

Mia paused for a moment. “We’re planning on tackling a problem that affects all nations: finding ways to combat the effects of famine.”

None were surprised by these words. Instead, they all nodded along in understanding, as Mia had repeated these sentiments ever since they had come to know her. Or perhaps, this was another step

forward down a familiar path, as this not only helped prepare for the famine at their doorstep, but would affect generations to come.

The Serpent Priestess Valentina had once said that as long as humans were human, the strong would continue to trample the weak, and the victors would continue to turn the losers into fodder. She believed this was an undeniable aspect of human existence—something inescapable.

The research Mia proposed was very much the same. As long as humans were human, they needed to eat. As long as humans continued to consume in order to sustain their life force, food scarcities—and thus, famine—was unavoidable. The research Mia was now trying to start directly related to this fact.

As soon as Mia recognized the awe that had spread to those around her, she continued her words. “This is all Miss Rafina’s idea. I was incredibly moved to receive such a wonderful suggestion. I had been wondering what I could do to help the situation, but Miss Rafina beat me to the punch in finding the answer. She is truly wonderful.”

Mia was a multitasking princess (read: chairwoman cum foisting president) that never forgot the importance of dumping the mental load on others. Taking responsibility for someone else’s work and earning their ire was completely out of the question, especially if that person in question was Rafina.

After she made sure to deliver some praise, Mia continued. “This is something that must be discussed between Saint-Noel and Saint Mia academies, and thus, something I had thought should be discussed between me, who bears responsibility for Saint Mia Academy, and Miss Rafina, who bears responsibility for Saint-Noel Academy. However, I’m also this academy’s student council president, and thus, I thought it would be best to discuss the matter with the rest of the student council.”

Once Mia had reached a good stopping place, Rania raised her hand. “This may be unrelated, but may I say something, Princess Mia?”

“Of course. What is it?”

Rania stood up and looked at everyone in the room before she spoke. “I hear that the new strain of wheat developed at Saint Mia Academy will be sold in ample quantities in Tearmoon starting next summer.”

Mia nodded. “Considering the size of our wheat stockpiles, I

think that's our only choice."

Using wheat would diminish their stock. Even if it wouldn't be gone forever, their stock would shrink in proportion to how much was distributed.

Given that we're sending some to foreign nations as well, it's bound to diminish even faster than we've predicted.

As of now, there had been no noticeable upset in the markets of neighboring nations, and that was because the decrease in harvest caused by the cold had been supplemented by selling stockpiled wheat and wheat imported from abroad by Forkroad & Co. However, they wouldn't have access to those wheat stocks forever.

"If we run out of our own stock, we will need to supplement it somehow. Increasing foreign imports isn't very realistic, which means our only option is to use the cold-resistant wheat to increase our harvests," said Rania after nodding in agreement to Mia's previous words.

"Could we use Saint-Noel's name value to spread usage of this wheat strain to other nations?" asked Mia as she glanced at Rafina.

"Of course. The church is here to save the weak and the poor, so I have no qualms about using Belluga's name or the Central Orthodox Church to spread the cold-resistant wheat abroad. I would hate to steal the accomplishments of Saint Mia Academy, so... How about this? Why don't we spread it as something endorsed by Saint-Noel Academy?"

Thanks to Rafina's strong approval, the groundwork to spread the cold-resistant wheat of Mia ver.1—as well as the updated Mia ver.2 and Mia ver.3—to nations far and wide had been laid. Anyway...

"Rania wished to confirm that we'll be able to effectively spread our new knowledge about wheat by using the cooperative relationship between Saint-Noel Academy and Saint Mia Academy, yes? I believe we can expect some secondary effects from that as well, but we'll need a joint research project that can draw attention. I'd like to hear all the opinions you all have, and I ask that nobody shoots down a single one," said Mia as she glanced at Keithwood. He tilted his head, seemingly unable to grasp the meaning of those words, before Mia continued. "There's no need to worry about the reality of implementing these ideas either. For now, I want us to brainstorm freely and gather all the ideas we can."

Thus, Mia implicitly revolted against Keithwood for having

crossed out all her ideas at the library. She was a multitasking princess (read: a yes-man with an idea cum persistent revenger), after all.

Chapter 32: The Holy Lady's Anguish

Watching Mia lead this meeting had Rafina fretting. *What should I do?*

And why was that? Because Rafina's suggestion of joint research had been made out of jealousy of Esmeralda.

"I would once again like to stress how impressed I am with you, Miss Rafina. While I was well aware of the effectiveness of such a plan, I couldn't have Saint Mia Academy bring up such discussions. You have my deepest thanks," Mia had said with a grin, and with that, it was all over. While Rafina flashed her usual cool smile, she was unable to look Mia in the eyes.

Not everyone could be like Mia Luna Tearmoon, as the ability to empty one's mind and ride waves as the aurelia was a rare skill indeed. Having been showered with such intense praise despite having different intentions, Rafina couldn't help but feel embarrassed. In fact, she was dying to scream, "Please! Don't say any more!"

For one, Rafina had not suggested such an idea with pure intentions. Instead, her reasoning had been dyed with ugly selfishness.

Not everyone could be like Mia Luna Tearmoon, as being blessed with the foolhardiness to jump onto any wave that came one's way and ride it to the end without knowing where it would lead was a rare thing indeed. Basically, Mia Luna Tearmoon was a young woman of supernatural ability!

Putting jokes aside, Rafina was unable to stop these discussions despite her panic, as they were heading toward an incredibly admirable path. Rafina's comment had deviated from the matter at hand, but instead of shooting it down, Mia had spun it into something incredibly meaningful.

The guidance she offered next was so wonderful as well. She focused on gathering ideas, making it so everyone would feel free to speak without having to worry about criticism. She's so talented.

As the daughter of Belluga's duke, Rafina would occasionally

participate in meetings held by the Central Orthodox Church, and she was often vexed by how fruitless they could be. In fact, the air in the room was often so uncomfortable that she wished for nothing more than to run. Being able to lead a meeting down a fruitful path was an incredible skill, yet Mia had accomplished this like it was nothing. *She really is amazing...*

But what most moved Rafina was the fact that Mia was never afraid to rely on the power of others. She didn't place excessive faith in her own abilities, and she was able to do whatever it took to be just. To Rafina, she was so dazzling she practically glowed.

Mia and I really are completely different. I see I still have a lot of work ahead of me.

Suddenly, Rafina recalled their tea party from yesterday, and how Mia had said she was glad to have Rafina as a friend—a *dear* friend. *I need to do my best to live up to those words.*

But just as Rafina was reflecting on all this, the discussion began to head down a dangerous path. Yet, she hadn't realized where it began, only the words, "Effective plan...would be research...on capturing rabbits."

Tiona's maid, Liora Lulu, had been the one to speak those words. While she wasn't technically a member of the student council, it was a common belief at Saint-Noel that the knowledge of one's servants was the knowledge of one's master. Thus, Liora made use of the knowledge she had as a member of the forest-dwelling Lulu tribe, but...

"We capture rabbits...with bows. But also...use traps. If we improve traps...we can capture...more rabbits," she said while wiping the drool from the corner of her mouth.

"I see..." said Mia as she brought a hand to her chin. "What a wonderful idea that could only come from you, Liora. Rabbit stew is incredibly tasty, after all. Having all one could want would be wonderful, and if we could effectively capture rabbits, then..." Mia wiped the drool from her own mouth.

The possible extinction of all the rabbits of the forest was a genuine concern of Rafina's. While she was the type to look at rabbits and find them cute, she had never looked at one and thought it seemed tasty.

"Traps would be... Well, I wonder..." Rafina had been ready to step in, but she instead held back and corrected her words, as Mia had already instructed them all to refrain from shooting down

other's ideas.

Rabbit stew, hmm... I suppose it's my own selfishness that makes me pity those rabbits. Such research may be necessary if we want to keep all the children fed. I really do have a long way to go.

"I have a suggestion, Miss Mia." Chloe was the next to raise her hand. "I've actually been reading this book lately..." She pulled out a volume entitled *Exotic Recipes for Exotic Delicacies: Part 5*. How terribly frightening. In fact, Keithwood had shrunk in on himself in shock, but Chloe paid him no mind and continued onward. "It made me realize that delicacies are often hidden in parts that tend to be discarded. Thus, we could research how to safely eat those parts of animals, like raw organs..."

Raw...organs? While Rafina maintained her façade of a cool smile, she shivered on the inside. As the Holy Lady, she would eat any food presented to her in any village with a smile, and naturally, she wasn't picky about her food. However, that didn't mean she had any modicum of desire to eat raw organ meat. Perhaps if it was cooked, but raw? Absolutely not.

"According to this book, worms are also highly nutritious."

Worms... Rafina imagined a long, hairy one writhing on the ground. Rafina wasn't a fan of bugs. In fact, she was quite against them. If she saw any bug in her room, whether it be a long-legged spider, a larva, or a beetle of some sort, she wouldn't touch it, but she wouldn't smoosh it either. Instead, she'd carefully put it on a corner of a book and take it outside, but that wasn't because of her pure, magnanimous heart. Nope. She just thought smooshing them was gross.

You can...eat those? R-Really? Even if it was necessary research that would solve famines for good, Rafina didn't think she could ever accept that. *B-But I can't destroy the atmosphere Mia created. Ugh, but...*

Rafina was sucked deep into a discordant whirlpool.

In addition to Liora, who grandly displayed the wisdom of the Lulu's, and Chloe, who gleefully displayed the knowledge she had gained from her cooking book, a few other creative and outrageous ideas were offered, which gave Keithwood a terrible stomachache. But they failed to reach a conclusion, and the meeting ended with a promise to discuss the matter again at a later date.

Chapter 33: Bel Finally Begins to Use Her Brain. Finally...

"Hmm..." Bel was visiting the library that day. All the fun and excitement of summer break had tossed all notion of figuring out why she had been summoned to this world out of her mind, which was what brought her here today.

"I kind of get why Great-Grandmother Patricia was brought here, and I kind of get how Grandmother Mia's influence and genius is so grand that it departs from the normal workings of this world, affecting the past, but..." Bel folded her arms and pondered aloud, "Just what am *I* here to do?"

That was a question nearly impossible to answer. Even if she found something that seemed acceptable, it was difficult to know whether it was *the* answer. Not to mention...

"And when will I go back to the future? How?"

While Bel fretted over this, the Ludwig of this time had told her, "There likely is no answer as to how, as jumping between times is a feat only the Holy Deity can control." He pushed up his glasses and continued. "And if that is true, you should approach the question from a different angle. Why were you brought to this time, and what was the impetus that thrust you here?"

Ludwig's advice had been not to consider the facts of the situation, but to consider the reasons behind it. He hadn't provided her with an answer, but had led her to a new angle of thinking.

"The reason I was brought here, huh? But that's so hard to figure out." Bel plopped her butt in a chair and kicked her legs. Her eyes wandered around the room as she groaned. Then, they wandered once again until they landed on a huge pile of books. "Books... Books!"

Elise's face became clear in her mind, but in the next moment, another bespectacled friend of her grandmother's came into view. "That's right. Aunt Chloe told me to read a lot..."

Chloe was the head of the Mianet, Grandmother Mia's book buddy, and the grandmother of one of Bel's friends. Whenever she visited Lunatear, she would bring lots of books as gifts. As Bel had only read Elise's novels when she was young, Chloe had once told her this: "The books Elise writes are colored with her thoughts and ideas, just like Miss Mia's thoughts and ideas fill the Princess Chronicles. While learning that is quite important, I believe it's just as important to read books written by all sorts of different people to expand your horizons. Books can teach you plenty of things, and they can serve as hints to guide you in your thinking."

"At least, that's what she said..." muttered Bel as she looked at the books in the library. Reading them seemed...like an incredible bore.

"Oh, that's it. I'll ask the Aunt Chloe of this time if she has any books that could give me some hints."

Just as Bel's line of thinking was about to follow the exact same path Mia's tended to follow, a voice called out to her. "Huh? Miss...Bel?"

Speaking of the devil, Bel lifted her gaze to find none other than Chloe Forkroad.

"Oh, Chloe! Tee hee! This is perfect!" said Bel with a devilish grin.

Failing to notice this grin, Chloe approached. "Are you reading here alone, Miss Bel?"

Ever since she learned that Bel was Mia's granddaughter, Chloe had begun to address her formally. Bel had grown accustomed to this term of the address during her time in the future, but it felt strange to suddenly be called something different by someone she knew so well.

"Miss Bel?"

"O-Oh, right! Um, Chloe? You don't have to be so formal with me."

"No. If you're Miss Mia's granddaughter, then I must treat you with respect." She made this declaration with an awfully serious shake of her head. Then, she stared right into Bel's eyes. "To think you really are her granddaughter... It sounds like something out of a novel."

"That's a very Chloe-like thing to say!" said Bel with a grin. "You've read a lot of other books besides novels, huh?" she said

while staring at the heavy tome currently in Chloe's hands. "Miss Mia told me that you've read every book in this library. You're amazing!"

With that, Bel was creating a wave—one that would carry some apt advice from Chloe right to her.

"I…see." Chloe brought a finger to her lips. "At first, I read to kill time…or maybe it would be more accurate to say I read to hide from the awkwardness of sitting in class alone. In any case, I only read all these books because I had the time to."

"Huh…?" Bel wasn't expecting to hear all this, and it caught her off guard. She had always thought Chloe simply loved books.

"At first, I really was trying to just pass the time. But then, I met Miss Mia. I made a friend I could chat with, and I lost the need to hide from that awkwardness. It was then that I began to wonder why I read so much." Chloe flashed an awkward grin. "Part of it was to help create topics of conversation with Miss Mia, but that wasn't all. I realized that reading truly was something I adored." Now, she looked Bel straight in the eyes. "But that's not all. It's not that I just love books—I began to think that I wanted to serve Miss Mia through the knowledge I gained from my reading. After that, I decided to read all sorts of things."

"To help her through the knowledge you gained?"

"Exactly. I'm able to help my dear friend through the knowledge I gain from my dear books. Don't you think that's wonderful?"

After hearing all this, things suddenly made sense to Bel. "It…is. So that's the creed that governs your life, Au—Chloe."

To Bel, Chloe was a kind woman who always gifted her books, but now, she realized that came from experiencing the power books had given her. *Miss Mia really has all sorts of amazing friends.*

With her respect renewed, Bel left the library. The matter of receiving Chloe's advice had disappeared from her brain.

Chapter 34: Princess Mia Takes the Air of an Oasis

Saint-Noel Island boasted multiple beaches overlooking Noelige Lake. White sand spread as far as the eye could see, and atop it walked a single young woman, the sand crunching beneath her feet. Her light gold hair danced in the breeze that blew from over the water and glittered in the light of the sun.

She held her hair down with one hand and breathed out an anguished sigh. Her blue eyes looked out over the lake, reflecting her sorrow. To avoid any possible misunderstandings, it needs to now be stated that this was a description of none other than Mia—an account that purposefully made her sound like a princess of a mighty nation who had come to a summer oasis. If Mia tried, she could look just like this.

Now, it should be stated that Mia was without a doubt a princess of a mighty nation, and it was in fact a problem that she could only create such an aura if she tried, but anyways...

After leading a discussion with the student council and pushing them along at the right moments (only because she lost the will to put in effort partway through and that was all she could muster), she had come to the lake to revitalize her weary heart. Now that summer had passed into a deepening autumn, the wind carried a hint of winter chill.

“This wind feels wonderful. Doesn’t it, milady?” Anne had accompanied Mia, and she asked this question with a soft grin.

“It does. Autumn has certainly arrived. This season always has such wonderful food.”

They say that autumn comes with clear skies and fattening princesses. It was time to store food in preparation for the winter. Lately, Mia had been baffled at how delicious all food had tasted to her as of late, but after receiving this explanation from Chloe, everything had made sense. Since Mia was preparing for winter, all food tasted absolutely divine! Now, this did beg the question

whether food was *not* delicious during summer and spring, but this never even occurred to Mia. Autumn was a time to gather winter stores, thus gaining F.A.T. was unavoidable! (Q.E.D.!)

"By the way, Anne, I've been thinking that a grand event is important for getting close to someone, but what do you think?" Suddenly, Mia decided to ask her trusty vassal for advice. In the end, Mia had failed to get any event ideas from the student council that would help her grow closer to Orania; they had gotten so excited about the joint research that Mia had lost her chance to cut it short.

Well, that's important in its own right as well. While we didn't reach a conclusion, it was a fulfilling and fruitful discussion.

Mia just couldn't bring herself to cut this meaningful chat short in front of Rafina in order to discuss event ideas. Thus, she brought the matter to her trusty vassal and tactician, Anne.

"To get close to someone?" Anne put a hand to her chin and pondered. Then, she seemed to suddenly realize what Mia must be talking about.

"Yes. I was thinking a big event would help create a good opportunity for that."

"I agree!" she answered incredibly seriously, wearing the unmistakable visage of Love Governor-General Anne. She seemed ready to intercept a large navy with only a few forces under her!

"With that in mind, I was thinking of planning some sort of autumn event for everyone."

"I see. I think that's a wonderful idea. What sort of event?"

"Hmm... They say that autumn is a season of good appetites, so I was thinking we could go mushroom hunting in the forest." Mia casually offered up the very same idea Keithwood had already shot down.

"I think it's best we try another idea," Anne plainly refuted Mia's suggestion.

"B-But why, Anne? Not you too..." Mia looked at Anne with an expression that said, "Anne! How could *you* betray me too?!"

Anne explained herself calmly. "I think it would be hard to create some alone time while mushroom hunting. Not to mention, you'll get so caught up in the event that you'll forget all about making connections, milady."

"Ugh... Now that you mention it, you're right. Your advice seems worth listening to." Mia had no choice but to defer to the

opinion of her dear vassal. “Then what would you recommend, Anne?”

“Hmm... A horse ride, perhaps? Or maybe dancing would be...” Anne swallowed her words. “That’s...normal, and Elise said normal is no good.”

“No good?” Mia couldn’t help but groan. *I see. So we can’t have normal. There seems to be great significance in those words.*

To Mia, dancing and horse riding were “normal” activities she was quite accustomed to. Since she was easily able to imagine how fun they would be, it was both easy to plan and to invite others to participate with her.

However, there was a chance that it was *abnormal* for Orania. She was almost certainly unaccustomed to horse riding, but princesses typically were well accustomed to dance starting at a young age. Still, that was Mia’s sense of what was typical and wasn’t a sense Orania would necessarily share, just like how she hadn’t shared Mia’s sense that sweets were beloved by all, or how Mia’s sense that gifting a lavish present would make the receiver happy hadn’t been shared by Rafina during the previous timeline.

“Considering it now, forcing what’s ‘normal’ here on someone who has just come to an unfamiliar land isn’t the right approach. I need something she’s more accustomed to, something that will remind her of home...” Just as an idea began to solidify in Mia’s mind, Anne caught sight of someone.

“Look, milady.” She pointed at a group of approaching children.

“Greetings, Your Highness.” Julius, the man leading them, bowed to Mia.

“Hello, Mr. Julius. Are you all headed somewhere?”

He glanced at the children. “I was hoping to show them some of the animals that call the beaches of Saint-Noel Island home.”

“I see. What an excellent idea.” Mia was quite impressed. Knowing the fauna around you—and more importantly, which you could eat—was as necessary a survival skill as knowing how to get water. Being ignorant of what tasty things were around you was a horrendous tragedy.

“I’m very impressed with the classes you plan, Mr. Julius.”

“Thank you for your kind words, Your Highness.”

There was a bit of a misunderstanding between the two, but anyways, Mia suddenly realized that Yanna and Kiryl didn’t seem to be in the best of spirits. “What’s wrong, Yanna?”

Just as those words left Mia's mouth, someone pulled on her clothes. She looked down to find Patty, who seemed like she had something she wished to say.

"Patty?"

Patty stood up tall and brought her lips to Mia's ears. "Um, it seems like Yanna and Kiryl saw the princess of Ganudos, and it brought some memories back to them..."

"Oh, right. Orania..." It was then that Mia suddenly realized that Yanna and Kiryl had been discriminated against in Ganudos, and that it was doubtful that they thought of the nation fondly.

"I see I made a mistake. Hmm..." Mia folded her arms and began to ponder.

Patty continued speaking. "We just saw her fishing over there on the beach..."

"Fishing? Huh..."

Mia hadn't been expecting this. She stood still, hanging her blank head.

Chapter 35: Mia Never Forgets the Follow-Up!

"Fishing...? You mean, like, for fish?"

Now, it should be noted that Mia *did* in fact know what fishing was. While she had never had the opportunity to try her hand at it herself, she may have had to if her time on the deserted island had lasted any longer.

Obtaining a reliable water source is essential in survival situations, and fish are the best food water has to offer! Mia was always gathering information that would help her survive should she have to escape a revolution, but...that was knowledge she held only for survival. In other words, she had no intention of utilizing such wisdom when she still had plenty to eat.

"While there aren't many nobles in Tearmoon who enjoy fishing, they do go hunting. Perhaps this is similar? Ganudos Port Country is on the sea, after all. Maybe it's not so strange that Orania enjoys fishing rather than hunting...I think?"

Mia pondered for a moment. *If I'm going to get close to Orania, I need to know her better. I need an event that will suit her fancy...and this might be the perfect opportunity!*

Why had Orania turned down her offers for a tea party? Because she had no interest in sweets and snacks, of course. But what options did that leave Mia? Only putting together a plan that would have Orania dying to hop on board!

That was what I needed to do to get close to Rafina, now that I think about it. Had I invited her to discuss the portraits our fathers made without our permission, we may have been able to understand each other, perhaps even well enough to confide in. That strategy might even help her develop her relationship further with Rafina now that they were already close.

"What wonderful news! Now I only need to head there myself and gain control of the scene!" Mia was ready to dash off, but she stopped herself and glanced over at the two siblings. "Yanna, Kiryl."

They lifted their faces at the sound of their names.

Mia crouched down to match her eyesight with theirs. “I have absolutely no interest in saying anything about the unfavorable memories you suffered in Ganudos. But please, remember that right now, you are here at Saint-Noel Academy, and that you are under the protection of both Miss Rafina and myself.” Mia placed a hand on Yanna’s head. “I think you two will be fine, but if anything happens, do not hesitate to let us know, okay? While I doubt there will be any issues, if Princess Orania or anyone else bullies you, let us know right away. Got it?”

Immediately, the light began to return to Yanna’s face. As Visalians, Mia may need their help in locating Hannes, but even more importantly, they were dear friends of Patty’s. Maintaining an amicable relationship was clearly the best course of action.

And if—just if—I happen to find her bullying these two… Mia might be able to utilize that fact to drag Orania to a tea party!

Having made such calculations, Mia once again addressed Yanna. “Got it? There’s absolutely no need to hesitate. No matter how minor, I want to know about it, okay?” Now, Mia looked at all the children of the SEEC program. “And that goes for all of you.”

The children stood there with their mouths agape, shocked that a princess would suddenly address them.

“If there is anything troubling you, please let either I or Julius know. And please, there is no need to waver.” Mia grinned. “Oh, but don’t make any selfish requests, of course! For example…asking that we make all the food served in the cafeteria sweet. Such willful asks will not be implemented.”

Mia had once been one step away from including an incredibly similar request in her campaign pledges for student council president, and yet, she was now brazenly denouncing the very idea!

“If you are unsure whether your request is selfish, please just say it. I can’t promise that it will be implemented, but I nevertheless promise that your words will never fall on deaf ears.”

When appeals were ignored, the people who made those appeals tended to fall silent. Once someone began to believe that their words were pointless—once they began to think that their situation would never change—they stopped speaking up at all. Thus, Mia made sure to emphasize that while they couldn’t change the world to match all the appeals they received, they would listen regardless.

"After hearing your thoughts, I'll carefully consider what the best course of action is. So please, tell us anything at all."

It was important that others believed that the injustices and dissatisfaction they suffered were heard by others and acknowledged well enough that it led to introspection. Mia knew well that people tended to lock their dissatisfaction deep inside themselves. It wasn't easy for the people to criticize the tyranny of the one who ruled them—even harder if they felt that their words couldn't beget change. Thus, they continued to lock their displeasure deep inside, even though their accumulating discontent could not continue to grow forever. Add enough water to anything and it eventually overflows; add enough anger and it would eventually explode. Should that anger be that of an individual, the damage would be small. But what about the anger of a group? Well, that tended to lead to a rush of water that swept a revolution downstream to a guillotine. Thus, Mia knew it was important to nip such thoughts in the bud.

This needs to be an environment where they can voice their complaints, and I need to make sure they see that actions are being taken to ameliorate them.

Mia flashed the children a grin. "Got it? That's a promise," she said, her voice cheery.

"You might listen to us, but that doesn't matter if you don't do anything to actually help!" came a voice in Mia's ears.

The Special Elementary Education Course consisted of four children ten years of age and three either seven or eight years of age. Among the four eldest, the best student of the bunch wasn't Yanna, Karon, or even Patty, but a young boy named Rollo. He had come from an orphanage in the Kingdom of Remno, and like the rest of the classmates, had been born in the slums and suffered his way to being taken in by an orphanage before finally arriving at Saint-Noel Academy.

The other orphan in the bunch, Karon, had tried to steal enough valuables at the academy to gain the funds to support himself, and at his core, Rollo was the same. He distrusted nobles, believing it was only a matter of time before they cast him aside. Thus, he wanted the means to support himself and decided to find that through his studies. With the advanced education offered at Saint-Noel Academy, he would gain the power to extend his life onwards,

and he worked diligently to ensure this.

But then one day, after the silver platter had been stolen, a princess stood before him and said that they had nothing to worry about—that no matter their origins, who they were, or their lack of power, she would accept them. Rollo had been pleased to hear these words at that school assembly, as it had been the first time anyone had ever accepted him unconditionally.

Despite that glee, summer break came. He wasn't fond of the fact that Mia had brought Patty and her two friends back to Tearmoon. The princess seemed to know Patricia, so there was nothing to complain about there. But Yanna and Kiryl? Why? What made them so special?

He followed down a path of negative thoughts. Could those words she shared at the assembly have not been for him, but Patricia, Yanna, and Kiryl alone? But, as if she could see through his doubts, Mia had extended her invitation to the entire SEEC program. "That goes for all of you," she had said, and it pleased him. He was glad to know that she cared for all of them, not just Yanna and her friends. And yet...

Really? Her words had been too perfect to take at face value. No matter how hard he tried, Rollo couldn't fully believe her, as he had been tricked by similar empty promises before.

Three years prior during the failed revolution in Remno, Rollo had met a young man who pronounced similar promises. His name had been Lambert, and he was the leader of the revolutionary army.

"What has the king done for us?! Nothing but beat us down and suck us dry of every last drop! It is our job to take down this tyrannical king and gain freedom with our own hands!"

Rollo had felt comfort in those words. They made the world seem brighter. While he didn't fully understand the content of his speech, he knew he wanted to follow this man until the very end. He joined the revolutionary army.

It was only then he knew that even among revolutionaries, orphans were only there to be trampled, beaten, and ruled over. In the end, nothing changed. The idyllic world that Lambert spoke of didn't exist—it never had.

Of course, Mia couldn't be compared to this man. Lambert had been all words and no action, while Mia had extended a hand to him herself. Lumping them together would be an act of insolence.

But at the same time, Rollo couldn't help but wonder if the

warmth he felt now would someday end. Ultimately, the life he now lived was the whim of a woman who had it all, and thus, he couldn't completely rid himself of his doubts.

"You might listen to us, but that doesn't matter if you don't do anything to actually help!" And thus, those words had slipped from his mouth.

I'm not wrong. A princess's empty promises are nothing but a way to deceive us! In the end, everyone's the same...

Rollo looked straight into Mia's eyes. "What use could listening to us possibly have?"

U-Ugh, that's a hard question to answer.

For a moment, this boy's question caused Mia to falter. After taking another look at him, she realized he had the countenance of an intellectual, and even more frightening, *glasses*!

The vibe he gave off closely resembled Ludwig's—the "stupid four-eyes" version.

This mini stupid four-eyes is quite cheeky to try to trip me up! Still, I can't let myself lose here!

Mia puffed some air out of her nose, taking only a split second to consider her next move. She had found her answer. *If he really is a mini stupid four-eyes, trying to convince him with words alone will only backfire on me. I need to cajole him with honest, heartfelt words that are also backed up by my experience.*

Slowly, Mia opened her mouth. "First, I want to clarify something. I am unfortunately no omniscient god, but a human being with countless faults. Even if all your requests are changes you truly need, I won't be able to respond to them all."

Mia's experiences during the previous timeline had made her painfully aware of this. It was impossible for a mere human to prepare food for her starving people in an instant, no matter how great and wonderful such a pipe dream would be.

"Even I can't help but think how wonderful it would be if the Holy Deity could come down and govern us directly," added Mia, jokingly. "However, that won't happen, no matter how hard we wish. I naturally have my faults. There will be times I'll inevitably fail, and times where I cannot find a good answer to your wishes. However, there's a large gap between the perfect outcome and the worst one."

Mia knew that her government could never be so flawless as to

completely wipe away the displeasure and complaints of her people. Thus, that had never been Mia's goal. *Making sure everyone is happy enough to refrain from starting a revolution, that everyone at the very least will not die of starvation and can regularly get their hands on tasty food... That's about all I can do.*

Mia turned to Rollo with resolve. "I can never be perfect, and I may never be able to provide you exactly with what would bring you true, unfettered happiness even if I do listen to your wishes. However, I might be able to provide you with something that would make things better for you. While I may do things that displease you, I won't do anything that will bring you complete dissatisfaction. That's why I want to hear from all of you, as that's the only way you can truly know the emotions that lie in someone's heart."

Those words were not just a tempting, empty promise, but Mia's honest thoughts on the matter.

"Does that answer your question, Rollo?"

Hearing his name caused Rollo's shoulders to tremble.

“You know...my name.” He blinked his eyes over and over in shock.

“Of course I do! Oho ho! I hear all sorts about the SEEC program from Patty, Yanna, and Kyril, even the mundane things. I hear you’re quite studious yourself.”

Mia took control of the situation and offered a small push. Compliments pleased everyone, meaning he’d likely be inclined to overlook any complaints he may have had with Mia’s answer.

Moons, I hope I satisfied him somehow or another...

At the end of the day, Mia wasn’t looking to build a group of elites with absolute loyalty to her, as she knew well how dangerous a group of blind followers could be.

Yet Mia had no way of knowing what had happened there today.

“Princess Mia...”

In Rollo’s young chest sprouted an unshakable seedling of loyalty. Unbeknownst to her, Mia had accidentally increased her numbers.

Chapter 36: She Had No Freakin' Clue!

"Phew... I'm glad we could reach an understanding." Mia bid farewell to the children, who waved back at her, and sighed. Then, she patted her cheeks and sped over to the beach. The gentle impact of sand gradually became a hard crunch until finally, she was met with large, jagged rocks.

"We've never been here before, milady. Watch your st— Eek!"

"Yes, and you watch your own step. It would be quite painful slipping here." With the grace and balance of a dancer, Mia caught Anne. Then, she began to squint her eyes. "Ah, how nostalgic. This really takes me back to the deserted island... Oh, she really is here."

Mia noticed a girl sitting on one of the rocks, absentmindedly staring at the water. It was Orania, and she was holding a pole in her right hand that connected to a piece of string coming out of the water.

At first, her dazed countenance was the exact image of Mia counting leaves, but as she gazed at the water's surface, her expression turned sharp in a flash—no, not really. She still looked like she was spacing out.

Orania's countenance earned a groan from Mia. *She's let out her line with a heart free of obstructive thoughts. Moons, is her focus astounding! She must be really capable!* Mia swallowed back her spit with a nervous gulp. Then, she noticed a fish basket filled with water by Orania's feet.

She's been trying to avoid me, but she can't run away now! With such thoughts in her mind, Mia approached with silent footsteps and peered into the fish basket. There were five fish inside, all of varying sizes. *Oho! I was convinced she just looked like she was fishing, not that she actually was! She's actually caught some fish!*

Mia was impressed. Then, right before her eyes, Orania pulled back her arms, bringing a huge fish from the lake with her.

“Amazing!” Mia couldn’t help but praise her, but Orania’s gaze never wandered from her prey. She quickly took the fish off the hook and returned the line to the water in one fluid motion. *She’s got the moves of a pro! I knew it; she* is *capable!*

Mia glanced at the long, plump addition to her bucket. “This fish is gigantic...”

“It’s a Bigmouthed Belluga Bass. They can’t survive in either salt and brackish water, only fresh, and since they’re so big and strong, catching one feels absolutely amazing. If you’re not careful, the line or pole will snap, so you have to be delicate.” She giggled. “That was an excellent battle.” There was a bit of a pep in Orania’s usual sluggish voice. “They taste quite good in stews, and if you grill them, their meat easily detaches from the bone. They’re very easy to eat, and since they have a lot of fat, they’re quite good raw too.”

“Oho ho!” A bell began to ring in Mia’s head. Explaining food was a surefire way of grabbing Mia’s interest. “That sounds excellent! You can eat them raw, boiled, or even grilled...” Mia folded her arms and nodded before turning her gaze back to Orania. Throughout their conversation, her eyes never left the water’s surface.

Orania hasn’t realized she’s talking to me. She’s so focused, and it looks like she’s having a good time...

Given her level of focus, she must have been having a blast. Right before Mia’s eyes, she caught another fish, then another.

“There’s a similar species that can be found in the Galilea Sea, but fish who can’t live in seawater really do have a lot of eggs, huh? This one...”

Watching Orania prattle on about fish left Mia certain of something: *If I want to invite the princess of Ganudos out, I need to do so with the sensibilities of someone from her country. Sweets making people happy is just* my *sensibility. I need to make sure I don’t consider my normal to be* the *normal. Instead, I need to consider what will make* her *happy!*

What would bring Orania the greatest joy? What would she most easily participate in? Finally, Mia knew the answer.

She’s from the port country of Ganudos, after all. The answer is obvious! I need to hold a fishing tournament! But with the whole

school…? No, I'm sure some of the students despise fish, so perhaps we should make participation voluntary. Anyway, I can figure out the details later. For now, I need to hurry and discuss this with Rafina! With a newfound idea, Mia rushed back to the school building. *I'm not too knowledgeable about fish myself. Oho ho! This will be fun. I'll get close to Orania, learn about fish, and then…hold a cooking party…*

Just as that thought passed through Mia's mind, someone in the boys' dorms—Keithwood—began to shiver, while Sapphias, far off and back in Tearmoon…was flirting with his fiancée Letizia. Mia, of course, had no freakin' clue.

Chapter 37: Princess Mia Philosophizes About Stew...

Upon returning from her relaxing walk on the beach, Mia reached the girls' dormitory and let out a sigh. "Hm, I've gotten quite sweaty."

While autumn was upon them and it was more chilly than warm, walking along such a precarious path had heated her into a sweat.

"Discussions with the student council have left me exhausted as well. I'd like to visit the baths before dinner."

"Yes, milady. I'll go prepare things for you."

"Oh, there's no need to rush, Anne. Please watch your step. I don't want you to fall."

"Of course, mil— Eek!"

After some clamorous preparations, Mia and Anne headed for the baths. Mia tossed off her clothing with help from Anne and rushed to enter the water. That's when she noticed there was another visitor.

"Hm? Who is it?" The girl staring into the tub had black, messy hair. "Chloe! You're here to bathe as well?"

At the sound of her name, the girl jumped into the air. Then, she brought her face closer to Mia's. "Ah, it's you, Miss Mia..." She appeared quite relieved to have figured out the identity of the other guest.

"Oho ho! You look rather different without your glasses." Chloe's usual intelligent countenance now looked a bit dazed, and it brought a giggle to Mia's lips. "What are you doing here? You're not the type to usually take baths."

"I'm not. Actually, I'm here to test out a new bathwater additive," she said with a grin.

"My! I see... But then why do you seem to be on edge? Oh! Could this be a secret from Miss Rafina...?"

"No, I've received her permission, but it just seemed, well,

strange, to explain to everyone who comes in."

"Ah, I get it. You're afraid it'll sound like you're making an excuse, and that people will think you're scandalously planting a prank," said Mia, the scandalous princess who had once tried to add mushrooms to the bath, with a shrug.

"That's why I was hoping to add them quickly and secretly."

"I see. And what exactly are you adding?" Mia's interest had already been grabbed by the small vial in Chloe's hands.

"It's a salt mixture."

"Oho! And what does salt do?"

"I believe it will have a rejuvenating effect."

"Wow... I'm excited to try it for myself," said Mia, quickly scrubbing her hair with the help of Anne. When she finally dipped herself into the tub, Mia let out a questionable-sounding huff. "I see... It sticks to the skin, and it feels wonderful." Mia stretched and grinned. "But really, adding salt to a bath is such a novel idea. Oho ho! It reminds me of the time I swam in the Galilea Sea."

"You've swam in the sea before? Isn't that dangerous?"

"Not at all! Once I gave it a try, it was surprisingly easy." The Waning Aurelia put on a boastful grin. "Well, the salty water did sting my eyes, but besides that, it was quite the piece of cake." She tilted her head as if watching bygone days. "Still, how odd. I would have never thought that different fish live in salty and nonsalty waters."

"U-Um, what do you mean, Miss Mia?"

"I mean exactly what I said! Fish that live in salty water can't survive in rivers and lakes, and those that live in rivers and lakes can't survive in salty water." Mia regurgitated exactly what Orania had told her earlier. "Considering that humans can swim in both just fine but the fish that live in the water can't, it seems quite strange. No, perhaps it's because they're so familiar with the water that they can't..."

Mia's warmed body left her head blank, leading her to mutter nonsense. She was so relaxed that she failed to notice how seriously Chloe was listening to her words, and her thoughts only trailed off to the more irrelevant. *On the topic of "strange," why don't I turn into stew when I'm in hot water? Is it because there's no vegetables with me? Would adding mushrooms and greens to my bath turn me into stew? What a philosophical quandary...*

But as Mia was making such incredibly superfluous

ponderings...

"Fish that can't live in salt water, you said? You're right. It is strange that some fish can survive despite a change in environmental conditions while others can't..." Chloe was deeply thinking this over.

"And you know what else is strange? I just saw a huge fish in Noelige Lake, but I wonder how much time it takes for a fish to grow so large. Now that I think about it, I really don't know anything about fish at all!" Mia further stretched out her body with a groan.

A fish that big is perfect for eating! Grill it, turn it into a stew, what have you, and I'm sure it will be delicious! Oho ho! I'm making myself hungry...

Mia leaned against the edge of the bath with an empty head.

Chloe, on the other hand, watched her with an expression that was seriousness incarnate.

Chapter 38: A Nighttime Library Visit

Quite frankly, the Holy Lady was a busy young woman. Recently, her character was that of a girl who only played (or at least, thought of playing) with her friends, but there was no end to her public service. She wasn't just a Holy Lady in name; she put in the work to back up that title.

Once the student council meeting had concluded, she received a report from her servants led by Monica, confirming that there was nothing abnormal going down on Saint-Noel Island. Then, she purified her body after dinner and headed for the cathedral, where she prayed every day as the Holy Lady to thank the Holy Deity for protecting the academy and ask that all its students receive His blessing. Bathed in the dim glow of candles was a pure young woman sitting on her knees with her palms pressed together.

With her eyes closed, her lips barely moved as she whispered her prayer. "I ask that Mia and I be allowed to play again tomorrow, and that our research will not be centered around bugs, but please do as you see fit. Really, I would be beyond grateful if I could avoid bugs, or that they at least weren't one of the grosser variety..."

After muttering a slightly *selfish* prayer, Rafina let out a sigh. This practice of hers had been inspired by advice she had once received from Malong. What did a Holy Lady need to lead people as a woman who felt happiness, joy, sadness, and anger? The ability to plainly and honestly lay out the discordant hearts of humans to the Holy Deity above, and to sometimes display that honestly to your friends as well. To not conceal and lock away your emotions as the aloof Holy Lady, but to reveal them and confide in your friends. After much troubled thought, that was the answer Rafina had arrived at.

Thus, after she offered her official prayers as the Holy Lady, she had begun to add in some small prayers that dealt with her own emotions. Even when she was worried her requests were too selfish or boorish, she resolved to pray for them anyways.

“All right.”

Now that her public duties were over, Rafina departed from the cathedral. Monica had been waiting outside for her, and the two turned to walk back to the girls’ dormitory when...

“My, is that...?”

They encountered a girl approaching them from the other end of the hallway, and it was someone Rafina had just seen during her student council meeting.

“Chloe! What are you doing out here?”

“Oh, Miss Rafina!” Hearing her name caused Chloe to jump into the air, and when she realized who the owner of the voice was, she visibly let out a sigh of relief. “Um, could I get you to open the library?”

Rafina hadn’t been expecting that request. “The library? It’s already closed for the day. Do you have some urgent business there?”

Chloe was normally a young lady of common sense, at least in Rafina’s eyes. Yet the sensible Chloe had asked to enter the library after it had already closed.

“I do. Just a moment earlier, I was having a chat with Miss Mia in the bath.”

These words were *also* unexpected. Rafina’s eyes opened wide. “Huh? You and Mia were enjoying time together in the bath? But I wasn’t invited...”

“Huh?” Chloe gave her a confused look.

Realizing her mistake, Rafina began to panic. “Oh, um, I mean...” Her mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water.

Chloe clapped her hands. “Oh, I’m so sorry. You wanted to test the effects of that additive for yourself, didn’t you?”

“Huh? Oh, yes. Yes, I did. That’s exactly it!” She nodded, her face awfully serious—and awfully stiff. “Of course I would be interested in what bath additives the students here will be using!” She wore the face of the Holy Lady and her usual cool smile. “Anyways, what did you need from the library?”

She changed the subject.

“Oh, that’s right. I’ll explain later, so could I have you open it now? I think this will help Miss Mia.”

Now, refusing wasn’t an option for Rafina. Mia’s actions almost always helped people, and if this was going to help her, there was no reason to oppose Chloe’s request.

Rafina sent a glance at Monica, who bowed and left. “All right. Why don’t we head for the library?”

The door had already been unlocked upon their arrival. Monica stood just outside, her expression cool and collected. She was quite the capable maid.

Once they entered the library, Chloe slowly began to explain herself. “I think...I may have an idea for the joint research.”

Rafina blinked her eyes at this sudden development.

“Earlier in the baths, Miss Mia said there were some fish who can only survive in salt water, and others that can only survive in fresh water. She mentioned how fast they grow too. So, I was thinking that if we’re going to research something new that will help defend against famine, maybe we could research fish.”

“Fish?” Rafina brought a hand to her chin. This topic was a tad unexpected. Still, it was true that fish could be collected even during poor harvests, and that developing an efficient method of farming fish could help defend against famine. Additionally, they could research inedible fish. If they discovered a way to eat them, they’d be able to increase the food supply. It wasn’t a bad idea.

Rather... *This will be way easier to eat than raw organ meat and bugs! Mia really is the best!*

Rafina had been wondering what she would do if a grinning Mia presented a shiny bug to her and told her it was incredibly juicy. What would become of her? To Rafina, this had been a serious predicament. This suggestion of Chloe’s was excellent news.

“I thought it would be best to begin by doing some research. I wanted to read this book so terribly I just couldn’t sit still...”

Chloe stopped in front of a bookshelf and pulled out one of the spines. Its title was...*Exotic Recipes for Exotic Delicacies Part 7 ~Monstrous Sea Creatures! How to Dine on the Human-Faced Fish~*

“Chloe, I don’t think that’s...”

Rafina’s smile was just a *tad* forced.

Chapter 39: A Cushiony Aurelia, Mia!

Three days had passed since Mia had found Orania on the bank of Noelige Lake, and finally, Mia had summoned the student council for a long-awaited meeting. Rafina, the vice president, alongside first Sion, then Abel, Chloe, Tiona, Rania, and their vassals entered the room. Mia observed their faces as she worked out how to direct the conversation. Of course, all of this was in order to hold a fishing tournament to win Orania's favor.

Well, if the student council agrees to hold the tournament, it'll happen whether the students like it or not. What's important is coming up with a reason for students to accept this tournament that won't let things get out of hand.

Mia didn't want anyone lamenting that the student council had begun to grow high-handed once she had become president.

"Thus, I believe there is a need to discuss and share our opinions."

In the end, Mia decided that she needed to present the merits of holding this tournament to the student council. Quite honestly, Mia wanted to frankly tell them that this was a ploy to get to know Orania since she refused all her tea party invitations. But now, she had a reason she needed to tread carefully.

Thus, Mia first needed to explain the merits of holding a fishing tournament. She looked into the faces of everyone gathered in the student council room with a kind grin. "It's autumn already," she said, pretending this was just a casual remark.

"It is. The colors in the forest are quite beautiful right now." Tiona was the first to respond. She entered the conversation with a relaxed grin.

Mia nodded. "We were too busy to do anything last year, but the year before featured a horsemanship tournament, a mushroom hunt, and all sorts of fun events. I was hoping to hold another similar event this year."

For some reason, Mia felt like Keithwood had shivered as soon as she had said the words "mushroom hunt," but it was his master,

Sion, that next spoke. “I see. That sounds like a wonderful idea. I’m sure those in the SEEC program will especially enjoy it.”

“Indeed, and I have the *perfect idea*,” Mia emphasized as she looked around the room. For some reason, Keithwood’s smile seemed to have frozen onto his face, but Mia continued on regardless. “Why don’t we hold a fishing tournament?”

Relief immediately flitted over Keithwood’s face, but immediately, his expression grew serious as he began to mutter to himself. “I suppose we’ve avoided the worst outcome. No, this is Princess Mia we’re dealing with. I can’t let my guard down.”

Everyone else, on the other hand, appeared to be taken by surprise at the suggestion. “A fishing tournament? All of a sudden? What’s going on, Mia?” It was Abel who asked the question that was on all of their minds.

Mia nodded. “The other day, I bumped into the children of the SEEC program on the beach of Noelige Lake. Apparently, they were there to observe the animals that called the lake their home, and I thought it would be perfect to give them an opportunity to get to know these fish better to supplement their studies. Not to mention, I’d like Bel and Patty to take some interest in this world as well...” Mia mercilessly used children as a dupe. “Plus, the noble children and those in the SEEC program were just starting to understand each other before summer break began. I was hoping to keep that momentum moving and bring them closer together.”

“I understand, but isn’t fishing still a little unexpected coming from you?”

Mia had no choice but to surrender. “You’re right. To be honest, that wasn’t my main motive for holding this event. Rather, it’s Orania.”

“Princess Orania?”

The whole crowd looked utterly confused, but Mia was most concerned about Rafina. *We’re reaching the most difficult stage of this conversation.*

To fire herself up, Mia swallowed a bite of cake. How scrumptious!

Then, she took a sip of tea. How refreshing!

Finally, she closed her eyes and began to speak. “I want to get Orania on our good side so that we can get a foothold into Ganudos. I’m sure you all are already aware of this?”

“Yeah, I remember you mentioning that,” responded Abel with

a nod.

"I was hoping this fishing tournament would be an opportunity to do so. As a princess of a port country, I thought fish was something she could get excited about."

"But is there really a need to hold a fishing tournament just to get close to her? You could invite her to a tea party or a picnic." Rafina tilted her head, clearly puzzled by Mia's thinking.

That's exactly how I thought she'd react. It was a sensible question, but it was also something Mia hadn't wanted her to touch on. She didn't want to encourage any ill feelings toward Orania, and *that* was the reason Mia had originally concealed her true intentions.

Just what would Miss Rafina do if she knew Orania was ignoring me? Even just imagining it sent a shiver down Mia's spine. One wrong step and she'd reawaken the slumbering lion.

"Ah, I see. Huh. So, she's ignoring you... Hm..." she imagined Rafina saying with the scathing eyes of a beast. Mia shuddered.

She was quite certain her other friends, such as Rania and Tiona, would be quite indignant as well. Of course, Mia was happy to have friends who would feel anger at her unfair treatment, as it meant they cared for her. The only problem was what would happen if the flames of their antipathy and ire boiled over into an uncontrollable wildfire. From Mia's perspective, Orania's treatment had indeed been rude, but she felt that letting that anger get the best of them would only lead to more troubles later.

Mia needed to become Orania's ally, not her enemy. For that sake, she wanted to avoid creating any perilous circumstances.

Whether it be relationships—or anything really—it's much more difficult to fix something after it's already been broken.

Luckily, Mia had already experienced the silent treatment. She had been terribly ignored during the previous timeline, so much so that Rafina asking "Who are you again?" had been enough to bring her nearly to tears. Thus, the silent treatment that Orania was giving her had been nothing. It was too minor to earn Mia's anger or inspire any grudges.

As the most magnanimous one in the room, I need to be the one to bring an end to Orania's poor attitude. That will keep our problems to a minimum, so I just need to keep it to myself. I've told Anne not to share this with anybody, so everything should be fine.

Mia was a cushiony aurelia full of extreme gentleness and

kindness!

Not to mention, her attitude reminds me of how I once was. I just can't stand to see her like this.

Once, Mia's ignorance had led her to adopt a tyrannical attitude, resulting in a terrible fate. Mia couldn't stand to see Orania end up alone by following the same path. Therefore, Mia revealed the words she had saved up her sleeve with a kind grin. "Of course, I'd like to invite her to a tea party once she grows more accustomed to life at the academy. But considering she's come to an unfamiliar land, I think we need to give her a reception befitting a princess of Ganudos Port Country." After revealing her perfect excuse to the world, she took a sip of her tea.

"Ah, I get it..." Both Rafina and Chloe seemed almost disappointed by these words.

Despite Mia's confusion, she continued onwards. "I'd like to use this opportunity to solve all our problems with Ganudos in one fell swoop. As sorry as I am for roping you all into this, I do hope you will grant me your cooperation." With that, Mia silently bowed her head.

Chapter 40: The Ignorant Princess Orania Smiles

"Hah..."

A satisfied sigh reverberated throughout one of the girls' dorms at Saint-Noel Academy. The girl who now called this room home had just recently moved in, and was none other than Princess Orania Perla Ganudos of Ganudos Port Country. She lay in bed with a satisfied grin.

"I caught so many fish today! Tee hee! That was so much fun... It's a shame I can't cook them, but still, I had fun...!" She stared at her right hand before sleepily closing her eyes. "Noelige Lake," she said with a laugh. "It's a good fishing spot. Fishing in the sea is fun, but so is fishing in lakes... I'm glad I came here."

Orania brought a hand to her cheek and tilted her head. "But studying's a pain. No one ever barks at me back home in the castle. This place really is annoying..."

Suddenly, there was a knock at her door.

"My apologies, Your Highness. I've come with a report."

Orania opened the door and stared at her servant with a lazy, blank expression. "Hm...? What is it?"

"I just heard from another maid that the academy will soon be holding a fishing tournament, and that all the students will be competing."

"Oh...? A fishing tournament? How fun...!" she said with a giggle. "Princess Mia has some great ideas..."

Her maid watched her with a hint of contempt. "But won't participating in an event held by the student council mean defying His Majesty's orders?"

Suddenly, Orania scowled. She now remembered the words her father had shared with her before her departure. "Hm... Well... I guess my father did say to stay away from Princess Mia... But..." She clapped her hands. "If every student is participating, I have to too, right...? Refusing this will be too blunt. She'll hate me..."

Orania had already refused Mia quite bluntly, thoroughly annoying Mia. But apparently, Orania was none the wiser. “And putting Princess Mia aside... Won’t Esmerelda hate me too if I’m mean to Miss Mia...? That’d be bad, right? Ganudos needs our relationship with Duke Greenmoon.”

“You’re right. However—”

Orania ignored her maid and continued talking. “And I don’t think my father will say anything either... It’ll be fine! Totally fine,” she sang without a worry in the world. Then, she hopped into bed.

“Do you really think so?”

“I know so. I mean, my father...” She was silent for a moment. She shook her head. “My father sees me as his precious daughter. He loves me, so he’ll excuse a little selfishness... There’s nothing to worry about at all.”

Gently, lightly, she gave an empty-headed grin. It was the grin of a princess, proof that for better or for worse—or perhaps, even tragically—all that was happening was beyond her sight. She was a princess, and thus, the only expression she showed her maid was a genuine smile.

She responded with a deep bow. “Of course, Your Highness. Your father’s affections are directed to you more than anyone else, and thus, he would forgive most of your selfishness. However, this isn’t—”

“Like I said... It’s fine! He won’t get mad at you! I can’t even imagine my father getting mad... Can you?”

More important than all that was this fishing tournament that would be held on Noelige Lake. This would be too fun. Not participating simply wasn’t an option. Lazily fishing by yourself was enjoyable, but so was testing your fishing skills against others. The secluded princess was starved for enjoyment.

Her maid shook her head with a sigh. “Well, if you say so, Your Highness...”

“And I do say so. Stop thinking about the hard stuff and just think about fun... You like fishing too, right?”

“No, not particularly.”

“Oh... You don’t? Well, whatever. Just make sure you’re prepared, okay...?”

“Yes, Your Highness. I’ll ready a fishing pole and basket.”

With that, the maid left the room, leaving Orania looking a tad confused. “Does she look down on me? Well, whatever.”

Orania Perla Ganudos was an ignorant princess. She knew not of her people, had no interest in international relations and had failed to receive an education that befitted royalty.

However, ignorance and acumen were not contradictory. She knew exactly what her maid thought of her—she could feel it—and she knew exactly what the look she had given her meant too.

But more importantly...

“Fishing! Tee hee! I can’t wait!”

She didn’t care about the contempt her maid had for her, or the proper etiquette a princess was supposed to have. She just wanted to have as much fun as she could. That was just the kind of girl she was.

Side Story: Esmeralda's School Visit — The Secret Maneuvers of the Head Etoiline—

In the domain belonging to Viscount Berman located in the southern region of the Tearmoon Empire, a peculiar carriage traveled a country road far away from the domain's capital. At a glance, the carriage seemed plain and crude, the type one might expect a rural noble from a small nation to use, or perhaps a merchant if he really tried.

However, if someone knew where to look, they would notice that this carriage was of incredibly sturdy build, and incredibly expensive. Thus, the clever would realize that this was an undercover carriage ridden by an eminent noble. In this case, that happened to be...

"Ugh, this country road is so incredibly dull," muttered Esmeralda Etoile Greenmoon as she gazed outside the slightly opened carriage window. The scenery failed to change around her, and it left her so listless she let out a yawn.

"Lady Esmeralda, a lady of the illustrious Greenmoons shouldn't..."

"Hmm? But Miss Mia does this all the time. I'm simply imitating the actions of the princess, a royal lady who ranks even higher than myself," she said matter-of-factly.

Her personal maid Nina stared back at her. "Lady Esmeralda, that sort of...well..." She gave a deep, dramatic sigh. "Listen, Lady Esmeralda! I can't offer a rebuttal against such sound logic. It's fine to be more unreasonable—more irrational!" her fists were clenched.

"Wh-What's gotten into you, Nina?"

She looked up to the sky. "There is no need to remember my name. As your maid, you may offer me less concern. And to return to my earlier point...calling me silly names like an 'impertinent maid' or a 'maid careless with her words' is part of what makes you so charming, Lady Esmeralda."

Nina's face was quite pained as she rambled on about her ideal version of Esmeralda, inspiring some reflection in the latter. *Nina must be exhausted! I really do need to take better care of her.*

Yes, *that* was her resolve. The noble lady and her maid didn't quite understand each other.

Anyways, Esmeralda's party continued down the country road toward Princess Town—or really, Saint Mia Academy, which stood at the town's center.

House Greenmoon, which belonged to the Four Dukes (aka Etoilers), had particularly strong ties with foreign nations. Ever since the days of old, their active efforts in building relationships with foreign nobles had left them with not only goods from all over the world, but a knack for paying attention to how knowledge may be utilized. Thus, the Greenmoons built connections with academia as well, utilizing the knowledge they gained from professors and other domestic intelligentsia to better Tearmoon. And of course, they wished to form a relationship with Saint Mia Academy as well. As a lady of House Greenmoon, curiosity about this Tearmoon school said to rival Saint-Noel Academy, the pinnacle of learning across the entire continent, came quite naturally.

Thus, Esmeralda visited with perfectly pure intentions...

"I can't wait to see how majestic Prince Echard looks!"

Or perhaps, the incredibly serious affair of building connections with the teachers of the academy was just one of the reasons for her visit?

"I absolutely can't wait to watch Prince Echard present his research!"

Yes, Esmeralda was taking advantage of class observation day so she could witness Echard's majestic figure.

"If his letters are anything to go by, it seems like he must have been working quite diligently. Oho ho! I'm sure I'll be impressed!" Esmeralda couldn't completely conceal her excitement. "Oh, and well, I suppose I should make sure that the teachers who got into the academy based on our family's recommendation are properly doing their jobs."

Esmeralda's interference during Saint Mia Academy's founding had originally led to a poor relationship between the academy and the Greenmoons. However, their relationship had largely recovered, partially thanks to Mia's dealings. House Greenmoon actively recommended excellent teachers to the academy, and thus,

observing their performance was part of Esmeralda's job as well. She was not—absolutely *not*—just coming to see Echard in class.

"Still, that'll just be a quick thing on the side! Oho ho! I can't wait to see Prince Echard!" A large swath of farmland stretched out before Esmerelda's carriage. "My, this is even more boring! It's farmland as far as the eye can see! It's exactly what you'd expect from the country, and it's incredibly boring and..."

Esmeralda suddenly cut off her words. She brought her hand to her mouth, which was contorted in fear. "And...frightening," she muttered.

She knew well that Saint Mia Academy had focused its research efforts on farming techniques, and that their discovery of cold-resistant wheat and development of new cooking techniques had already been hugely impactful. And yet...she had just called the farmlands of the academy "boring." For a moment, she had thought it would be better not to waste this land on farms, instead paving it over into a city, a much more *productive* option.

How frightening. I know the truth, yet even I can think such thoughts.

Esmeralda knew that this land suffered the blight of anti-agriculturalism, that the first emperor had instilled the belief over generations in order to waste the farming potential of the Fertile Crescent.

Yet that thought still crossed my mind. It's a belief that runs deep, and eradicating it from Tearmoon's nobles will certainly not be easy.

But at the same time, she had another thought—if they were going to change that view, then the way to do it was by spreading proper knowledge. In other words, education, something House Greenmoon was deeply connected to.

"There's plenty I can do... Huh? Isn't that...?" Upon discovering something in the fields, Esmeralda spoke to her coachman. "I'd like to get off here. Can you stop?"

"Lady Esmeralda?"

She responded to Nina's curious look with a sigh. "I noticed an acquaintance of mine, so I thought I'd say hello." With that, Esmeralda jumped out of the carriage.

The acquaintance squatted in the field, seemingly examining the condition of a crop.

"Hello. May I have a moment?" asked Esmeralda.

Her acquaintance silently stood and looked behind her. “Yes. What is it?” She had black hair and looked like she was in her mid-twenties. Her face was one Esmeralda knew well, as they had seen each other at Saint-Noel’s. In fact, they had done much more than just saw each other.

“Greetings, Princess Arshia Tafrif Perujin.”

For a moment, Arshia simply looked puzzled. Then, her expression shifted into one of surprise. “Y-You’re…”

“It’s been quite a while. I’m Esmeralda Etoile Greenmoon.” Despite her friendly smile, what passed through Esmeralda’s mind was a scene from Saint-Noel Academy—the face of the girl before her contorted in shame and defeat. Perujin had held a tea party to entertain the nobles of Tearmoon. Naturally, Esmeralda was invited, and naturally…she had ignored it. She walked right past the room prepared for her and headed for another tea party held by Tearmoon nobles out of spite for Perujin.

Esmeralda had once considered this attitude the natural temperament of a Tearmoon noble. Perujin Agricultural Country was a pitiful country that offered nothing but farmland, a vassal state to Tearmoon that lacked even its own army. Thus, she had believed trampling and belittling them was obvious and had acted accordingly, just like any Tearmoon noble might have.

But that’s simply because we make light of agricultural techniques. We need Perujin’s cooperation to realize Miss Mia’s vision. In fact, between herself and Perujin, Esmeralda couldn’t help but think *she* was the one who was more useless, as she had once undermined and belittled the very people Mia now needed.

That was why Arshia’s expression as she stood before her now was clouded, as if she were suppressing anger at her past humiliation.

This is bad. I’ll end up holding Miss Mia back.

Now that she had been freed from the first emperor’s curse, she knew painfully well how rude she had once been, and she wanted to settle the matter once and for all. Thus…Esmeralda bowed before the princess. “I… I must apologize for how I once treated you.”

“Huh?” Arshia was clearly shocked.

“At the academy, I was incredibly rude to you and your people. I beg that you forgive me for my actions back then, and that somehow, you refrain from doing anything that might hurt Miss Mia because of me.”

That was what Esmeralda truly feared—that the rude actions of herself and the other Tearmoon nobles would stand in the way of Mia's goals. Of course, Arshia would despise her, but she hoped with all her heart that it wouldn't have any effect on Mia.

For a long while, Arshia simply studied Esmeralda. Then, she finally spoke. "Lady Esmeralda, I am the second princess of Perujin, and given that title, I hope that you understand that I cannot easily forgive you, knowing how you have humiliated my people."

Her words had been quiet but firm. Esmerelda simply took them in. She had been expecting this answer, and given how the people of her nation had acted, she felt that no amount of ire from the people of Perujin was too extreme. However...

"I cannot accept your apology quite yet. But..." Arshia turned her attention to the field, which was filled with children. They had stopped their work, watching the two converse with looks of worry. "These children are of Tearmoon, and many are orphans. They are the weakest, and in times of famine, they are the first who will be discarded." She brought a hand to her chest. "I believe in the world Princess Mia is trying to create, and I want to help her create it. I never want to see these children starve, whether that be in Perujin, Tearmoon, or any other nation. Thus, I plan to continue teaching at this academy and progress my research."

Arshia watched Esmeralda with a dignified, powerful expression as she continued. "Someday, when the people of Perujin and Tearmoon stand on equal terms with shared respect, I will gladly accept your apology. Are you satisfied with that answer?"

Esmeralda gulped. She once again was faced with the reality that a woman she had once ridiculed was of excellent character, and that the view of the world she had once held was incredibly warped.

"Thank you, Princess Arshia." Her words were but a whisper, and after another bow, she returned to her carriage.

"Hey, Nina?" Shortly after the carriage had resumed its course and once Arshia was no longer in sight, Esmeralda called out to her maid. "Was that out of character? Is it right for an Etoiline to bow her head to a princess of Perujin?"

She had simply been trying to take the proper actions as Mia's best friend, but she couldn't help but wonder if she had been mistaken, and her questions were an embodiment of that fear.

Regretting past actions was quite simple—it was reflecting on them and adjusting your actions accordingly that was hard. Despite acting in accordance with the road Mia wished to travel, Esmeralda couldn't help but worry.

Nina took a long look at Esmeralda. Then, she answered. "No, it's not right for an Etoiline." She gave it to her straight!

"Huh?!" Esmeralda was frozen in surprise.

But then, Nina flashed a mischievous grin. "Haven't I told you countless times that there's no need to bother remembering my name? It's unbecoming." The words flew out of her mouth, but her expression seemed stiff. "But…I commend your treatment of Princess Arshia. Adopting new, more useful values without hesitation or adherence to tradition is how House Greenmoon has always developed." Her smile softened. "Thus, your actions were very right for *you*, Lady Esmeralda, my beloved master."

"Nina…" She let out a sigh of relief, then arrogantly added, "How impertinent of you! A mere maid telling me what's right and what's wrong!"

Nina giggled. "Now this is the Lady Esmeralda I know."

Thus, the carriage containing Esmeralda and Nina arrived at Saint Mia Academy, the two girls chatting and teasing each other along the way.

Still inside the carriage, Esmeralda did her hair and looked in the mirror. Her gown was on the plainer side, and now that she had completely transformed into a commoner (at least she thought so), he gallantly infiltrated Saint Mia Academy—her incredibly high-class looking maid in tow!

The two stuck out like a sore thumb!

Once she had greeted Headmaster Galv, she strutted down the halls with a "So I'm a new teacher, so what?" attitude, her maid Nina following after her and exuding the aura of a capable maid.

Yup, *two* sore thumbs.

They casually sat down in the back of Echard's classroom, but once it was time for his presentation…

"Good luck, Echard!"

…cheers fell out of her mouth without thinking, rendering their disguises useless. Of course, Echard had noticed it was them as soon as they had stepped into the room. Despite his red-tinted cheeks and clear bashfulness, he flashed Esmeralda a smile.

Her excitement went through the roof! *Oh my moooons! To think the diligent, hardworking Echard makes faces like this! Eek! He's so cute!* She brought a hand to her cheek and watched him in a daze.

After burning Echard's gallant figure into her eyes, she brazenly asked his fellow students to make sure they treated him well before stepping into the hallway, hoping to cool her body, which currently felt like it was on fire.

"Ah, that was wonderful! Prince Echard's presentation was so interesting, and he worked so hard! I hope my brother learns a thing or two from him."

Not that Esmeralda was all too passionate about studying herself, but anyways, she caught sight of someone in the hallway. "Hm? My, I feel like I've seen her somewhere before..."

The familiar-looking girl had a shoulder-length bob and a confident look in her eyes. The fact that she had some younger students serving as her loyal retinue suggested her to be a woman of quick wits.

"May I have a moment?" Esmeralda spoke to the girl as soon as she was about to pass by. For a moment, the girl watched her curiously, but then, she opened her mouth.

"Greetings, Lady Esmeralda."

"Greetings. You seem quite familiar. Have we met before?"

"Yes, I used to serve as Her Highness Princess Mia's maid." She lifted her skirt and curtsied. "My name's Petra Rosenfranz."

She was the daughter of Count Rosenfranz, a house that numbered among Tearmoon's central nobility, and the girl who had served as Mia's personal maid in the previous timeline.

"My, so you're Count Rosenfranz's daughter! I see, so you used to work as Miss Mia's maid. That's why I recognize you." She flashed the girl a smile, but then, her expression soured. "My, but what is the daughter of a count doing here at school when she used to work at the Whitemoon Palace? Getting to serve as the princess's maid is quite the honor."

Working at the palace that housed the emperor was a respected position. She must have had a considerable reason to throw that status away.

Esmeralda folded her arms and pondered this for a minute. "Could you maybe be studying here because you failed at both becoming Miss Mia's personal maid and attending Saint-Noel Academy?"

Petra flashed an awkward grin. “It’s not that I like studying that much anyways, but...my family was quite persistent, so I ended up here. Ah, that’s right! Could you keep my attendance here a secret from Princess Mia? I doubt she remembers me anyway...”

“Of course she remembers you! But why do you feel the need to hide from her?”

“I...have my reasons.”

Esmeralda recognized the slight scowl she now wore. *Ah, this is how I looked when I had my own troubles.*

She surmised that Petra had done something bad and was thus trying to distance herself from Mia. That she thought of herself as someone unfit to be by her side.

Esmeralda had a flash of inspiration! “Oh! Did you do something to Anne when she was chosen over you?”

It was tradition for the lady of a high-ranking noble house to become the princess’s personal maid. Given that it grants the girl the honor of attending Saint-Noel Academy, the daughter of some nameless noble couldn’t be chosen for the job. As the daughter of a count, Petra was certainly the top candidate for the position, and yet, Anne had been chosen instead. Surely Petra had held a grudge. At least, that’s what Esmeralda had thought, but...

“I would never!” Petra firmly shook her head. She spoke her words seriously. “I know very well how perfect of a maid that girl is for Princess Mia. I would never complain!”

Her words were so passionate, they almost overwhelmed Esmeralda. But she managed to compose herself. “I see... Well, I don’t know what happened, but Miss Mia isn’t the type to sweat the small stuff. Once you’re ready, I’m sure she’d be more than willing to have a nice, long chat with you, and I recommend you do.”

Petra scowled. “I...wonder about that. It all sounds like a dream. I feel like I’d be bothering her...”

A dream... Esmeralda gulped when she heard those words. She shook her head. “Miss Mia would never make fun of you for that. Even if it were all a dream, I’m sure she’d take it seriously. So...okay?”

Petra averted her gaze. Apparently, her time was still beyond the horizon, and realizing this, Esmeralda nodded. “Well, I suppose some emotions are harder to come to terms with than others. I’ll keep this a secret from Miss Mia.”

“Thank you. Anyways, I have a class to attend, so...” Petra

bowed and left.

Esmeralda watched her disappear with a sigh.

Later down the line, Esmeralda would secretly begin working to convince Galv to employ Petra as a teacher at the academy. Once she graduated, she was certainly fated to marry, to live as a noble's wife until her end. But that naturally meant severing the tie between her and Mia for good. Should she be sent abroad, she would never get the chance to see Mia again.

Esmeralda didn't know when Petra would finally come to terms with how she felt toward Mia, but she still resolved to maintain as many of Mia's connections as she could, no matter how small.

"Miss Mia isn't the type to sweat the small stuff. As long as that tie remains, I'm sure the day will come where they can repair their relationship, just like it did for me..."

Holding that prayer close to her heart, Esmeralda prepared a path for Petra that could maintain her ties to Saint Mia Academy, and once Petra chose that path, she spent her days teaching the ways of society to her students. As an alumni herself, she taught and encouraged her students, creating many elites loyal to Mia's ideals.

This was just one of many connections Esmeralda forged in secret.

Esmeralda Etoile Greenmoon was the self-proclaimed head Etoiline and Mia's self-proclaimed best friend. She spent her days in a bustle traveling from one land to the next, and once she married her beloved husband, her efforts began to greatly reach beyond Tearmoon as well.

She gathered talent from all over the continent, serving as the oil that kept Mia's relationships moving smoothly. For these efforts, she left her mark on history as a woman who fully embodied the diplomacy of the Greenmoons.

But that was a history still unknown to all. Well, to all but Bel, that is.

Empress Mia's Diplomatic Diary (of Her Efforts to Not Lose to Esmeralda!)

Twentieth Day of the Eighth Month

Outcount Gilden came to visit me today. Apparently, both production of cold-resistant wheat and my idea to create a flower field attraction has increased his country's economic prosperity. He also told me he was planning on building a giant snow sculpture of me for my birthday festival this winter. Obviously, I tried to stop him, but I'm not positive he got the message.

As a gift, he brought me a set of thick honeys, which was apparently a by-product of the flower field. I placed a drop on my tongue as a taste test, and its rich, sweet flavor melted on my tongue. I was quite positive I'll be able to enjoy these honeys by themselves, but I decided to try spreading some on a piece of bread and having it with a cup of tea. The faint scent of flowers was excellent.

A truly fine specimen. This would be a perfect specialty product for Gilden Outland County.

☆x5

Twenty-Second Day of the Eighth Month

Sapphias came to thank me for saving Letizia the other day. Apparently, he's launched an investigation into the servants of House Schubert and all the noble houses in the Bluemoon faction to sniff out any remaining Serpents. However, fighting the Serpents alone is quite a tall order, so I urged him to discuss the matter with Ludwig and Rafina so they could send someone knowledgeable to help him.

He brought me some new sweets that House Langess, Uros's family, had developed, which was made by hardening milk. It was square in shape and white in color, and it jiggled when tapped with a spoon. It really was quite unique, and when I finally bit into it, it was both fluffy and sticky. Not only was it cold—it had a subtle

milky sweetness. It was delicious!

☆x4

Twenty-Third Day of the Eighth Month

Ruby came to visit me today, and she brought an assortment of fancy cookies to thank me for saving her from the fiasco of her engagement. They were horse-shaped! Could they have gotten the idea from me?

Their outsides were glazed in sugar, making them shine. At a glance, they looked like they could be brooches. They were incredibly sweet, and incredibly tasty!

I also got to hear the sweet details about her romance with Vanos! This was a subtle sweetness, which seemed very fitting for Ruby. I heard she secretly asked Aima for some romance tips, and I'm awfully curious as to what those tips could be.

☆x4 if including the romance talk (you're almost there, Ruby!)

Twenty-Fourth Day of the Eighth Month

Shalloak came to greet me today. Apparently, he had some business to discuss here in Lunatear. He gave me some dried foreign mushrooms, which he said go great in soups.

Having received the ingredients myself, I first thought to try my hand at cooking them, but I decided to hand them over to the chef. It would be a waste if I ruined them, and if I'm cooking mushrooms, then I want to pick them myself!

The chef will be serving me this soup tomorrow. I can't wait!

Huh? After reading this over again, I've really become involved in diplomacy, haven't I? Maybe even as much as Esmeralda! The Equestrian Kingdom has luscious, tasty milk, Ganudos Port Country has scrumptious seafood, and Perujin has it all! I'd love to share a meal with people from all these countries in the future!

Afterword

Hello, and long time no see. I'm Nozomu Mochitsuki.

The anime has finally begun! Only two episodes have come out at the time I'm writing this, but I've been incredibly moved to see Mia's myriad of expressions on television.

We've also decided to publish a special short story collection. There are plenty of extras that relate to the main story, so I'm very glad and thankful I've gotten the chance to collect them all together for everyone.

By the way, there's a short story revolving around Petra, who showed up in the side story for volume 15, called *The Girl Who Failed to Become the Princess's Personal Maid* (Volume 12 Digital Extra), but we weren't able to fit it into the short story collection. I'm hoping to release a second one, so please just wait a bit (or maybe more) longer!

Mia: "Singing, sliding, and playing tag with Li'l Guil in the anime has left me absolutely exhausted!"

Ludwig: "I am sorry to bother you given your exhaustion, Your Highness. New goods are being released alongside the launch of the anime. Would you check them over?"

Mia: "Goods, you say? Let's see... Cream puffs with my face on them, a collab café called 'The Chef's Manor'... Oho! How interesting! And finally, erecting a golden statue of Empress Mia in the Newmoon District as part of revitalization efforts... That one's a no, but I do eagerly approve of all the food-related ones!"

Ludwig: "And what about these goldleaf Miacakes?"

Mia: "Ugh, golden food... That's quite the hard line to draw... Should I give my permission? They won't be wasteful as long as they sell. Hmm..."

Now for some words of appreciation.

Thank you for the wonderful illustrations once again, Gilse. I've long awaited seeing Ruby and Sapphias in color, and you didn't

disappoint! Thank you as well to my editor F for his continuous support.

To my friends and family, thank you for all the support and encouragement you've given me.

Finally, I want to thank my readers. We made it all the way to an anime adaptation! This was all thanks to your support, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Mia's story will continue for a bit (or perhaps, a while) longer, so I hope to see you all again in the next volume!

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Tearmoon Empire: Volume 15
by Nozomu Mochitsuki

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